The term “Happy Holidaze” has become a cliché, the progenitor of silly memes and cards – and has also taken on a new meaning in 2020. What a year it’s been, and I doubt that there’s a single one of us who doesn’t feel dazed by it. But the holiday season is a time of rejoicing, and my holiday wish is that we can find renewed spirit, togetherness, hope, and, yes, joy during the season and in 2021.

I want to again take the opportunity to thank everyone at Copper for making this magazine possible. It has been, in the words of Paul McGowan, a “shining beacon,” certainly in my life, and it has helped me get through some tough times this year. Perhaps Copper has made your lives a little brighter also.

In this overstuffed holiday issue: John Seetoo recommends some Christmas songs you might not have heard before, and WL Woodward looks at favorite holiday movies. Wayne Robins reviews Dave Alvin’s From an Old Guitar: Rare and Unreleased Recordings. Jay Jay French ponders Zen and the art of criticism. Larry Schenbeck examines the bel canto work of Rossini. Ken Sander tells about his time with Johnny “Guitar” Watson. Don Kaplan asks: what happened to honk, bonk, boing and blomp? Dan Schwartz reflects upon Keith Jarrett’s retirement. J.I. Agnew concludes his series on vertical tracking angle and stylus rake angle.

Anne E. Johnson finds that Bach and Beck are where it’s at. Steven Bryan Bieler ponders chess and music. Adrian Wu continues his series on audio testing. Tom Gibbs reviews new releases from Smashing Pumpkins, David Bowie and Seasick Steve. I review the new book, Audio Research: Making the Music Glow and conclude our interview with The Audiophiliac, Steve Guttenberg. Ray Chelstowski has an inside look at when Clarence Clemons toured with the Grateful Dead. Stuart Marvin contemplates the many and varied cover versions of “Hey Joe.” Our audio/visual department
looks at late arrivals, audiophile wedding rings, days gone by, musical holiday gifts of yore, and more.
In the last installment, I discussed the most quoted test measurement in audio, total harmonic distortion (THD), and its correlation with sound quality. Once upon a time, audio magazines mostly gave a summary of the features of the equipment under review and the results of laboratory measurements only. J. Gordon Holt, editor and founder of Stereophile magazine was the first to break the mold in giving descriptive accounts of the sound of audio components. The pendulum swung even further in the subsequent years, with many reviewers concerned only about perceived sound quality and paying scant attention to the technical aspect of audio equipment.

There is a school of thought that opines: if a piece of equipment sounds good, so what if it measures poorly? The problem is that we do not have a standard for comparing subjective evaluations. How wide should the soundstage be? What is the correct tonal balance? Are the dynamics, both macro and micro, reproduced in full? As we do not know what a particular recording should sound like in the first place, it is difficult to know if it is being accurately reproduced by an audio system. We can only use audio systems we are familiar with as references. A recording might sound bad in a system because it is how it should sound, whereas another system might mask its faults and make it sound better than it is. That does not mean the second system is “better” than the first. This problem is perhaps more important for recording and mastering engineers than for audiophiles. Engineers want systems that reveal as much as possible, warts and all. Many audiophiles might find such systems difficult to live with.

To a certain extent, audiophiles can judge the merits of audio systems by comparing with their experience with live music, at least for recordings based on acoustic music. That’s why it is important for dedicated audiophiles to attend concerts and live music events regularly in order to provide a frame of reference. I attend concerts in concert halls, in salons, in jazz clubs and in friends’ homes. During the performances, I often pay attention to the sound as if I were evaluating an audio system, in order to take a mental snapshot of the sound of real musical instruments in a particular acoustic environment for later reference. I also mentally try to work out the best way to record these performances. Lots to think about but part of the fun! Even so, I do find measurements
to be helpful in finding weaknesses and faults in a system, which might not be so easy to work out by means of subjective evaluations.

I enjoy buying audio gadgets as much as any audiophile, and our hobby is full of gadgets; cable lifters, grounding boxes, anti-static guns, LP ionizers, Mpingo discs, tube dampers and a lot more. (I wouldn’t call isolation platforms and record cleaners gadgets, as they are pretty much essential.) In my experience, some of these make a perceptible difference, others don’t. Some are so costly that it is difficult to differentiate between a placebo effect (the more expensive the gadget, the larger the effect) and a real difference.

What I find the most useful though, and the most fun to use, is test equipment. One can spend a lot of time learning and perfecting the use of these types of equipment, and the result is often highly satisfying. Being an amateur without a professional engineering or acoustics background, I am probably just scratching the surface of what test instruments can offer. Nevertheless, I feel I have already made worthwhile improvements in my listening enjoyment using these gadgets. I would like to share my experience with Copper readers.

The first gadget I want to talk about measures the most important component of your audio system. No, not the speaker cables; it’s your hearing! I have always been aware of the need to protect my hearing since my high school days. Just before my final piano exam 40 years ago, I decided to clean my ears with Q-tips so that I could hear better during the aural test section. I must have pushed the ear wax further into the ear canal, as one ear became totally blocked. Panicking and running out of time, I went straight to the exam with one ear essentially deaf. I will always remember the anxiety of not being able to hear as well as I should under such circumstances, but I often use this as an excuse for my subpar exam result.

For years, I carried a pair of foam ear plugs whenever I went to discos, parties and concerts, in case the music got too loud. Aside from exposure to loud noise, there are many pathologies that can cause hearing loss, sometimes gradual, sometimes acute. Gradual hearing loss can be difficult to detect, and it is important to diagnose these problems early, since prompt treatment could preserve function and even reverse hearing loss.

Hearing tests have been around for decades, and are usually performed by an audiologist in a soundproof booth. I came up with the idea of designing an inexpensive equipment setup for home testing, which would generate a frequency response plot that audiophiles could upload into their DSP equalizer. I approached a colleague who operated a hearing center as someone who could potentially collaborate on this, and he agreed that it was an interesting idea. I surfed the web to see if this had already been done, and lo and behold, someone had already beaten me to it. An Australian ENT doctor had teamed up with an engineer and designed a pair of headphones and an app, which pretty much do the same thing as a professional hearing test.

They were looking for funding on Kickstarter. I therefore put my money down and waited. It took almost two years before I received the headphones. Called the Audeara A-01, they are nice, generic-looking Bluetooth noise cancelling headphones, but they also have built-in DSP functionality and their frequency response has been calibrated for hearing test purposes. The user needs to download the app and do the test in a quiet room. The test covers the frequency range between 100 Hz and 20 kHz, and comes in three different resolutions. The ultimate test consists of 32 frequency points and takes 10 minutes to complete. A series of beeps are played into one ear, and the user raises or lowers the volume with two on-screen buttons until the sound is barely perceptible. The user then taps another button to record the level and move on to the next frequency. The test starts at 1 kHz, goes up to 20 kHz, then returns to 100 Hz and goes up to 900 Hz to complete the test. The left ear is tested first, and then the right. It is best not to look at the screen while tapping the buttons until you
are ready to record the level, as there is a temptation to cheat if one feels one should be able to hear at a certain level!

The app can change the frequency response profile of the headphones to compensate for the non-linearity of the user's hearing response. I tried that and found the result sounded rather unnatural. Although the threshold for hearing high frequencies increases with age (in other words, the high frequencies have to be louder in order to be heard), the brain probably compensates and the perception of loudness is normalized once the level is above the threshold of audibility. For example, if the threshold of hearing a 1 kHz tone is at 30 dB, and the threshold for 10 kHz is at 50 dB, when both tones are played at 70 dB, the brain still perceives both as near-equal in loudness; if you boost the 10 kHz tone to 90 dB, it will sound 20 dB louder than the 1 kHz tone.

People who have high-tone hearing loss (defined as between 2 kHz and 8 kHz) have trouble understanding speech, since they cannot hear the consonants. When their interlocutors speak louder to compensate, they are often rewarded with the admonishment, "You do not have to shout. I can hear you!" This is because once the volume is above the threshold, it immediately sounds loud, as if the volume control goes from 0 to 80 dB in one step. This phenomenon is called recruitment. Even with the gradual decline in high-frequency acuity over the decades, I do not find familiar music sounding duller now than when I heard it in my youth, as long as the music is played at a sufficient volume (to the annoyance of my wife). The DSP function of the Audeara A-01 headphones is probably useful for people with significant high-tone hearing loss (the headphones also have a microphone and can therefore be used for making phone calls), but would not improve the tonal balance of music. Nevertheless, the hearing test function of the headphones is already worth way more than their modest cost, and I find the noise-cancelling function useful when I travel. I go through the test every three to four months, or whenever I feel paranoid.

The million dollar question is: at what level of hearing loss would someone start to lose the enjoyment of music? After all, the fundamental of the highest note on a violin is at 3.5 kHz, and that of the piccolo, the highest note of any instrument, is 4 kHz. One does not need to hear above 12 kHz to fully appreciate these instruments, since most of the overtones are second and third order.

There are anecdotes of elderly conductors who spent their whole career in front of orchestras without using hearing protection, and who need to wear hearing aids to conduct conversations, but nevertheless are able to pick out which violin is playing out of tune with the orchestra when playing tutti.

During the Hong Kong High End Audio Visual Show last year, I was introduced to a new friend called Wilson. He had just celebrated his 85th birthday, and he was a good friend of the late Arnie Nudell (physicist, loudspeaker designer and co-founder of Infinity Systems and Genesis Technologies). Wilson bought one of the first Genesis 1 loudspeaker systems to roll off the production line, which he is still using. He built a dedicated listening room within the warehouse of his import-export business, where he stores his large collection of professional reel to reel tape machines and master tapes. He goes to the listening room daily to tinker with his toys. Wilson has to wear hearing aids in order to conduct conversations unless the surroundings are very quiet.

A group of us visited him at his listening room one Sunday afternoon last fall. His system was very impressive indeed; detailed, with life-like dynamics and an imposing sense of scale. When he told us about the improvements he noticed after installing new cables and tube-rolling his conrad-johnson preamplifier, some of us were rather skeptical; could he really hear the differences, or was he just imagining things?
A few weeks later, the same group met at my home. I wanted to hear their impression of the differences between my solid state and my DIY tube tape head preamplifiers. Wilson was the first to point out the differences in string tone and the space between instruments while playing Analogue Productions’ *The Power of the Orchestra* Ultra Tape. He was spot on. It made me feel better that there is life after 60 (or 70, or 80) after all!

*Header image: Audio Precision B Series APx525 audio analyzer.*
Audio Research: Making the Music Glow

BOOK REVIEW

Written by Frank Doris

If I had to bet on it, I’d say 99 percent of Copper readers are familiar with Audio Research Corporation (ARC) and its creator, William Z. Johnson, as Audio Research is one of the most important manufacturers in audio. Celebrating their 50th anniversary this year, the Minnesota-based company is, simply put, one of the progenitors of the modern era of high-end audio and Bill Johnson one of its “founding fathers,” as The Absolute Sound’s Jonathan Valin named him.

Audio Research: Making the Music Glow is a new book written by audio writer Ken Kessler (he also digs fine watches, pens, wine and other stuff) that chronicles the history of the company through copious interviews, photos, personal insights and good old journalistic, well, research. It’s gorgeously designed by Henry Nolan – the presentation is first-class all the way. Kessler and Nolan have collaborated on three other books: Quad: The Closest Approach, McIntosh...for the Love of Music and KEF: Innovators in Sound. (Full disclosure: Ken and I are friends and so are ARC’s Dave Gordon and Terry Dorn. I knew William Z. Johnson and have met his wife Nancy and others whose stories weave through the fabric of Making the Music Glow. I received a review copy of the book. My opinions would be the same regardless.)
Bill Johnson and those interviewed are candid, and don’t shy away from talking about the company’s failures as well as triumphs. A couple of examples: upon its introduction in 1985, the SP-11 MkII preamp was hailed by Harry Pearson of *The Absolute Sound* in which he said, “there is no question that this is the world’s best preamplifier.” *Stereophile’s* J. Gordon Holt stated, “I get two consecutive gut reactions. First, my jaw hangs slack. Second, I get chills and goose bumps.” Yet engineering technician Chris Ossanna relates the story of meeting sound engineer and expert listener Jack Hjelm for the first time around 1991: “I came into the room one day and he’s got a pair of M-300 [amplifiers]...and he had a broom and he had his hearing protectors - shooting protectors - on. And he’s reaching out with the broom handle to turn on the amplifier from as far away as he could because he’d had way too many of these blow up in his face.”

As pointed out many times throughout *Making the Music Glow*, Bill Johnson was a man of unquestionable honesty and integrity. He was strong-willed and reluctant to listen to the opinions of others at times (though he mellowed in later years). Well, you had to be strong-willed to embrace vacuum-tube technology as the best means for reproducing music in the late 1960s, a time when everyone else in audio was abandoning it as antiquated, obsolete. Later on, he’d venture into hybrid (tube/solid-state) and pure solid-state designs, though tubes were and are the beating heart of ARC.
Johnson constantly strove to make the products better-sounding, sometimes going through dozens of circuit iterations before deeming a product ready for prime time. He was rooted in practicality, yet willing to take risks in his pursuit of sonic “High Definition” (a term the company was quick to trademark). On the other hand, he had to be persuaded, strongly, when others at ARC wanted to switch from black to silver amp handles.

Johnson was an avid pilot, devout churchgoer and husband and fiercely loyal to his employees – and this loyalty was returned. He would hire them on the basis of their character over their experience. Many times, when an Audio Research employee was facing financial difficulty, Johnson would personally help them. “He maintained a wholly professional relationship with the press, respectful but not worshipful or susceptible to their whims,” notes Kessler. He loved hearing a piano through a fine audio system but detested the sound of a saxophone.
The book is packed with such personal and factual details. It covers Bill Johnson’s pre-Audio Research days of building one-off custom tube amplifiers and modifying stock Dynaco units for better performance, and then founding the retail store Electronic Industries. Naturally, the 1970 origins of Audio Research are carefully examined, as are company milestones all the way through Johnson’s retirement in 2008 and the post-Johnson era of subsequent owner McIntosh Group, Inc. (in August 2020, the latter sold ARC to a privately-held company.)

The history of the company is illuminated through conversations with Bill and Nancy Johnson, recently-departed Audio Research president and CEO Jeff Poggi, plus present and former ARC employees Dave Gordon, now the new managing director of ARC, and Terry Dorn, Chris Ossanna, Leonard Gustafson and Warren Gehl as well as business associates and a who’s who of audio reviewers.
Of course, there are the products, presented in gorgeous photographic detail, from the first Electronic Industries SP-1 preamplifier through the modern-day offerings including 2020’s Reference 80S stereo power amplifier. The evolution of the aesthetic design, from Bill Johnson’s utilitarian preferences (amps like the D-79 look more like industrial laboratory equipment than audio components) to former design chief Livio Cucuzza and the McGroup Design Lab’s refined grace, is a topic in and of itself and, like almost everything in the book, is covered in depth.

Rather than a by-the-numbers account of every product Audio Research ever made, Making the Music Glow presents the Top 25 all-time greatest models, as chosen by employees and authorities on the company. Among the Top 25: the SP-6, SP-10 and SP-11 preamps, the Dual 100, D-79, D76A, D150, GS150, M300, VT 100 and VT150 power amplifiers, the Reference One and Reference Anniversary line stage and the Reference Phono phono stage. For completists, there’s a listing of every Audio Research product ever made, more than 170 in all, in chronological order.

The book isn’t cheap at $150 US, but it’s beautifully done, and its depth, attention to detail and illumination of the historical record are absolutely exceptional. Whether you’ve ever owned an Audio Research product or not, if you’re an audio enthusiast I think you’ll find it fascinating.
Wedding Belle Blues

**AUDIO STATIC**
Written by Peter Xeni

My Koetsu wedding ring is made from a braid of broken cantilevers with worn stylus tips in a cluster setting.
Beautiful ... and cheap too.

Yes, he is.
AUDIO-STATIC

My Katsuo wedding ring is made from a braid of broken cantilevers with worn stylus tips in a cluster setting.
Beautiful ... and cheap too.

Yes, it is.
In Part One of this interview (Issue 125) we talked about Steve’s first memory of listening to music, his careers as a projectionist and an audio salesperson, and how he became a music and audio reviewer. Steve is now the host of *The Audiophiliac Daily Show*, a popular YouTube channel. We continue here, although this time out it’s more like the both of us interviewing each other...

**Frank Doris:** We left off with you noting how hard it is to describe the sound of an audio component or loudspeaker, and how difficult it can be to determine whether what you’re hearing is actually the sound of the component or something else in the system, or some interaction.

When you’re reviewing a piece of equipment, obviously, you’ve got to use it with different electronics, different source components and ideally in different rooms, especially if you’re reviewing speakers. It’s hours and hours and hours and hours of work.

What do you look for in the sound of an audio component? Is it resolution, or tonal balance or some X factor?

**Steve Guttenberg:** I’ve had debates with people over the years about “subjective” versus “objective” reviewing. And I’ve always been a subjective reviewer, but as the years and decades go by, now I just unabashedly say, I like this because it does this. I’m not looking for the ultimate resolution or clarity or transparency. I like those things, but those would not be the deciding factors to me. What I want is more than anything is *engagement*. I want to be pulled into the sound. I don't care if it's accurate or neutral. That's not my personal goal. That's not of any interest to me.
I've made it my business to listen to conventional dynamic box speakers, electrostatic speakers, Magneplanars and open-baffled speakers. But horn speakers have been my obsession for the last two and a half, three years. Somehow horns seem the most...right. I'm not saying their totally accurate. I'm saying they sound more like live music, because what is most live music? It’s amplified, and music is sound coming out of horns. Right? So unless you listen to classical music or other music where there's no PA system involved – but even classical music can be amplified now – generally speaking, any kind of pop, rock, jazz, et cetera, et cetera is coming out of horn PA systems. So listening to that kind of music over horns at home, to me, subjectively speaking, seems more realistic. I'm not saying everyone feels this way, but it feels this way to me.

FD: Interesting point. The fact that people who listen to rock and jazz are used to hearing PA speakers, when you reproduce that sound by using speakers with similar drivers it corresponds to what you hear at a live performance.

SG: Yeah, and ideally, listening to compression drivers.

FD: I agree with you with respect to whether a system engages you or not. When I’m at an audio show, let’s say, my first impression in walking into an exhibit room is, does it draw me in or push me away? Then I’ll try to figure out why. Also, I might spend less time in a room that doesn’t engage me but I won’t fault it out of hand. I know how hard it is to get great sound at a show and what a crapshoot it is. And I’ve mentioned this before – sometimes two or more manufacturers will co-exhibit to save money on a room and they may literally have never used their equipment together before – and sometimes it just might not sound good. But people with experience can still hear the potential of something even under those kinds of circumstances.

SG: I just want to quickly note that I'm also a big fan of Magneplanar speakers. They're comparatively affordable as far as audiophile speakers go. And also because of their sense of size and scale in reproducing music. But if you're a reviewer and you're living with Magneplanars, and then next day you're going to review a stand-mounted speaker, that's going to take some recalibration time. If you go from hearing a [Magneplanar] speaker that's six feet tall to hearing one that's one foot tall placed on a stand, it's going to sound really tiny and little, so you've got to space your listening out a little bit. You can't go from big to tiny. Nothing good can come from that.

FD: Speaking of small, that leads to me ask, how do you deal with reviewing and keeping gear in an apartment?

SG: Actually I’m in a relatively big space. My wife is an artist. She has her space and I have my space, and that may change soon since we might be able to open up the space soon. But anyway, for the last 31 years, the problem for me as a reviewer is that I much of the time I don't actually have my own system set up. I have the stuff that I'm reviewing sprinkled in with the stuff that's my reference. So it's like an Erector set that's being put together and taken apart all the time, but I'm used to doing it that way.

It's kind of like when I worked in Sound by Singer. Room Three, for example, had a system that was the standard setup every day. And we would take it apart and put other components in that room to listen to, but at the end of the day, hopefully things would return back to what was normal for that room. That's kind of like what my room is. It gets put together and taken apart, and maybe a week out of a month, it has my reference system set up. The rest of the time I’m reviewing something.

FD: On another topic: The other day Jeff Rowland [head of high-end audio manufacturer Jeff Rowland Design Group] told me something that really hit me. He said, we can't go to shows anymore. We can't go to dealers. We're all stuck inside. But in place of that, people like you and I are
SG: I just have to interject an example. Pre-COVID I went to a guy's apartment in Brooklyn to interview him. He's a retired cop and he built this incredible horn system. He built a dedicated room for it and I made a video of it. The viewers went nuts because, hey, this guy Joe the cop was like the “man's man” audiophile. He builds stuff. Hey, he's building a turntable with a linear tracking arm! He has a machine shop in his basement. So he's like Mr. Macho, what every audiophile dreams of being. He's like the ultimate expression of being an audiophile who has built this system with his bare hands.

And the comments I got were just completely off the hook. Everybody loved him. They just said, “more! We want more and more and more!” It was truly remarkable. When audiophiles connect, even if now through videos, it's like, “wow, I relate to this guy.” Or, “I want to be that guy.” Or, “he has such cool ideas.” This is the thing about audiophiles, as you well know - they are all isolated, right? Their friends, their family, their coworkers think they're nuts. “I just spent $2,000 for speakers.” “That's crazy!” So they need things like YouTube and before that, Stereophile and The Absolute Sound. They need to know that there are other people who are equally or more passionate than they are, and actually seeing them on YouTube is a great way to connect.

FD: That's a perfect segue into another question: we've been around for a while. How do you manage to keep your enthusiasm? Once, an industry veteran I will not name said to me, “are you still interested in this crap?” Do you keep your interest, or at the end of the day, do you just walk away and say, “I can’t take it anymore.”

SG: Well, I don't literally think about it 24 hours a day, but I spend a lot of my waking hours on it, because I have to always be thinking about the next thing I'm going to make a video about. And some parts of my day involve sending e-mails and making telephone calls, trying to get more stuff. That takes a lot of time, because it takes a lot of follow up and I do eight reviews a month typically. But my enthusiasm is 1,000 percent real. I really love high-end audio. I really love the music aspect of high-end audio.

And really more than anything, I like the people in the business. As soon as I got into it at Sound by Singer in 1978 I started meeting people who had their own companies, designers, and other people who sold audio. I was like, “these are my people.” It was an instant, this is the place I'm supposed to be kind of deal. And that's still true.

FD: The Alexis Park?

SG: No, before...

FD: The Riviera? The Sahara?

SG: The Sahara. You'd go there and see all these new companies that had a room there and they're doing their thing. And then a year later, three quarters of them would be gone. And then there'd be a whole other group of people in those rooms, but some were able to stick around for the second year. And then came the third year, and the fourth year, and they're still in business today. These people are sort of living the dream of wanting to make a better speaker or amplifier or cable or whatever it was that they do. I just have the highest respect for these people 'cause they don't get into it to get
rich. They might make a really nice living from it, but they don't get rich.

**FD:** How about David Wilson? [The late David Wilson was the founder of Wilson Audio Specialities.]

**SG:** Around the early nineties he said to me, “you know, I couldn’t afford to buy my own speakers. I don't make enough money to buy a $150,000 speaker.”

**FD:** One of the beauties about getting older is you don’t care about stuff like that so much anymore. What do I really need? I don't care about driving a Ferrari. Sure, there’s gear I’d like that I can’t afford, but my system sounds really great now and it’s perfect for my listening room. Also, the older you get, the less you have to hide. As a matter of fact, when I tell readers embarrassing stuff about my life, they like it. Back in the day, Harry Pearson [founder of *The Absolute Sound*] wanted to make himself a mythical god, at least in print. That’s not our trip.

**SG:** Maybe I should interview you about your memories of Harry. My experiences with Harry were very limited.

**FD:** There are endless stories. When I first asked people whether I should write about my experiences with Harry for *Copper* I thought, does anybody really care about all this stuff that happened 30, 35 years ago? And the response was unanimous: “you have to write about it.” When you think about it, we worked for a guy who was like Halston or Jobs or someone like that; an icon. But there are some stories, that, really, should not be committed to videotape!

**SG:** I want to end with a little bit of talking about music. The ultimate attack on audiophiles is that we’re just obsessing about the gear and the music is secondary. Like the stereotype about the guy with a $100,000 system but he only has 12 records or something. And then there’s the inverse, the guy who’s got 100,000 records and a totally crap system to play it on. But most audiophiles are sort of in the middle.

I've also come very late to streaming music on a good audio system. Maybe a year ago I got a Bluesound Node 2i streamer. And I started listening to internet radio and looking around on Qobuz and playing things on my system. I realized that what’s really amazing about this period in time is that it's so easy to discover and look for new music. My favorite internet radio station is *FIP*. It's a French public radio station with a few different channels, but there's one that's called “La radio musicale la plus éclectique.” And it literally goes from opera to doo wop. The sets are like 1960s freeform radio.

I share this idea, especially for older audiophiles who haven't really gotten into streaming because I'm sure younger people do it all the time, but the older you are, the less likely it is that you'll be exploring. Yet you should. The possibilities are literally endless to just keep going and going and going in finding new music. And I am so excited.
Timing Is Everything

THE RUN-OUT GROOVE

Written by James Whitworth
"THE DELAY’S SO GREAT ON THIS RADIO I’VE JUST HEARD THAT THE BEATLES HAVE SPLIT."
"THE DELAY’S SO GREAT ON THIS RADIO I’VE JUST HEARD THAT THE BEATLES HAVE SPLIT."
The first time I heard Jimi Hendrix’s recording of “Hey Joe” was in English class at Shelter Rock Junior High School, an institute of higher learning where students dissected both frogs and music, thankfully in different classes. I mean, let’s be honest, dissecting animals and song in the same class would only be suitable for an episode of Showtime’s *Dexter*, and not *Shelter Rock JHS*.

When a progressive English teacher asked students to bring in some LPs so we could analyze and discuss song lyrics, a mate brought in the North American release of The Jimi Hendrix Experience LP, *Are You Experienced* (1967). The class then zeroed in on the track “Hey Joe.” (The UK version of the LP did not contain the track as it had been issued earlier as a single.) The entire class was immediately floored both by the LP and the song. I mean, honestly, how could one not be?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXwMrBb2x1Q

Although “Hey Joe” is mostly associated with Hendrix, the song was written in 1962 by Billy Roberts, a military school dropout who yearned to be a full time musician and songwriter. Roberts had a modicum of success, first in the folk scene of New York’s Greenwich Village and then later on the west coast.
“Hey Joe” has been recorded by hundreds of different artists, a diverse and eclectic group of musicians starting with The Leaves in 1965, pre-dating the Hendrix recording by less than a year.

Other covers range from a truly marvelous arrangement by jazz pianist Brad Mehldau (2012), a sampled version by rap artist Fat Joe (2009), and two recordings by Robert Plant, one with his pre-Led Zep group Band of Joy and another solo version on his 2002 Dreamland LP. Wilson Pickett’s cover (1969) featured a young, highly-regarded session guitarist by the name of Duane Allman. Perhaps the weirdest cover is a toss-up between Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds (1986) and Helge and the Firef*ckers (1999); Helge Schneider is a German comedian and multi-instrumentalist who does parody in the vein of “Weird” Al Yankovic.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrQGKHZ5KmE

Otis Taylor has recorded the song with three different arrangements on his LP Hey Joe Opus | Red Meat, recently re-released as a high-res reissue on PS Audio’s own Octave Records.

In comparison, the Beatles’ “Yesterday” has over 1,600 recorded cover versions, though really, how many different arrangements can be executed with a ballad like “Yesterday”? Conversely, covers on “Hey Joe” run the gamut from folk, folk rock, hard rock, R&B, jazz, blues to the downright frightening, as evidenced by Mr. Schneider’s cover.

Most people think Jimi Hendrix closed his set at the famed Woodstock Festival in 1969 with “The Star Spangled Banner.” In reality, the encore to Hendrix’s set was “Hey Joe,” played to an extremely sparse crowd as most attendees had already departed the festival grounds.

The lyrics to “Hey Joe” are hardly PC in any era, though modern-day mores may discourage artists from recording the track as it touches on a trio of no-nos: vigilantism, domestic violence and infidelity. The protagonist in the song is on the lam to Mexico after shooting “his old lady,” who he caught “messin’ round with another man.” Love indeed does come in many flavors!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuQwf6iS4aA

The Leaves actually recorded “Hey Joe” three times, with their final effort the only recorded version to crack the U.S. Top 40. This arrangement added some fuzz tone guitar and a bridge giving the track a little more commercial appeal. Reflecting on the recording, Jim Pons, bass player for The Leaves, The Turtles and later the Mothers of Invention, noted, “it was a big departure from the song’s original folk roots, though purists thought it wasn’t true to the character of the song.”

The covers of “Hey Joe” have been eclectic and wide ranging. Check out the abridged list below:

The Leaves (1965)
The Byrds (1966)
Love (1966)
Cher (1967)
Johnny Hallyday (1967)
Deep Purple (1968)
Johnny Rivers (1968)
Wilson Pickett (1969)
Patti Smith (1974)
Roy Buchanan (1974)
Spirit (1975)
Ten Years After (1979)
Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds (1986)
Seal (1991)
Eddie Murphy (1993)
Helge & The Firef*ckers (1999)
Robert Plant (2002)
Brad Mehldau (2012)
Charlotte Gainsbourg (2013)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJ72c3PkPM4

Adding to the song’s enormous history and cult bonafides, during a 2019 “Thank Jimi” festival in Wroclaw, Poland, 7,423 guitarists simultaneously played “Hey Joe” in a public square, breaking the record set at the previous year’s festival by 12.

Of course, given the song’s simplistic chord progressions, there isn’t a garage band anywhere that hasn’t performed “Hey Joe.” Even I covered the track, well, kind of, sort of. At my younger brother’s bachelor party, we did away with the traditional debauchery associated with such celebratory occasions. Instead, a dozen male friends and family dined in a private room in a really great Italian restaurant in Washington, DC. My older brother and I were picking up the tab and made the mistake of delegating wine responsibilities to a friend of our marrying brother, an oenophile with very good but extremely expensive taste. Do vintage Brunellos and Barolos mean anything to you?

When we exited the restaurant, much to my delight, a busker was performing outside and had just hit the opening notes to “Hey Joe,” the sound of his guitar and amp resonating through the streets of a quiet DC neighborhood. In my festive – okay, truth be told – inebriated state, I immediately pounced and offered the guy 20 bucks if I could do the singing. (I mean what’s $20 when you just spent hundreds on some good wine.) I’m quite certain I botched the lyrics, with my slurred delivery no doubt providing added effect. My cousin said, “wow, you sounded really, really good,” a very nice compliment, but truth be told his judgement was as impaired as mine.

“Hey Joe,” first recorded 55 years ago has aged just like a fine wine, with an endless range of winemakers adding their own personal touch to the varietal.

So, what’s your favorite cover? Hendrix is certainly the odds-on favorite, but as an alternative the aforementioned Brad Mehldau Jazz cover is exquisitely arranged, recorded and produced. I reached out to Mehldau and he responded:

“I fell in love with Hendrix’s version the first time I heard it on Are You Experienced as a teen. I only found out years later that it was written by Billy Roberts. The song has a few things going on at once: There’s this repeating C-G-D-A-E cyclical harmony that weaves through the whole thing, mysteriously (a lot like the trippy refrain in Deep Purple’s ‘Hush’ – which came first actually?) [Billy Roberts – Ed.] Then there’s a trance aspect of the E note that could be played through all those chords, like a drone, and finally, most importantly, for me the song is all about the blues – it’s a blues that’s not a blues in form but in feeling. I’ve found a lot of places I can go with it – trance, straight up blues, what have you. I play it a lot solo as well.
The other thing that has made me continue to play it since I recorded it is that I see it as an anti-gun-violence song. ‘Hey Joe – where you goin’ with that gun in your hand?’ It’s a question he’s asking everyone, and when I play the song now, I think about the victims of gun violence, and channel some of that rage and sadness into what I’m playing.”

Warm Regards,

Brad Mehldau

Header image of Jimi Hendrix courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Steve Banks.
While doing her *Stripsody*, performer Cathy Berberian expressed herself by making vocal sounds like woo woo, stomp, boing, blomp, honk, bonk, thud, ouch, ugh, brrrrr, pant and achoo. She wasn't commenting on her physical performance, a car accident or the temperature of the room. Her activity had nothing to do with taking off her clothes. She was presenting a piece she had composed based on sounds derived from comic strips.

*Stripsody* was written during a period (mid-to late 20th century) when avant-garde music was at its peak — a period that produced new approaches like *aleatoric music* (where elements of the composition are left to chance or chosen by the performers), *musique concrète* (a type of musical collage combining sounds found in the world around us),[1] music notations that look more like modern art than notes on a staff, electronic music[2] and extended vocal techniques.

Most of those experiments sounded exactly like that: pieces that were interesting but not musically satisfying. While performances of early experiments aren't likely to be included as part of your annual concert subscription, electronic music became and is still commonplace in films and on television. Extended vocal techniques not only appealed to composers and listeners but continued to flourish during the late 20th century.
Simple wordless vocalizations like “ooh” and “aah,” as well as more adventurous techniques like Schoenberg's *sprechstimme* (a type of speech-song) had already been incorporated into Western orchestral and chamber music during the early 20th century.[3] Later in the century several prominent composers integrated extended vocal techniques into their compositions. For example **Luciano Berio**, a leading avant-garde composer who was married to vocalist Cathy Berberian, wrote *Sinfonia* for orchestra and eight amplified voices requiring vocalists to speak, whisper or shout words.[4] Composer **George Crumb** became famous for his unconventional music notations and extended instrumental and vocal techniques that produced a variety of unusual timbres. György **Ligeti**, recognizable for his music featured in the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, tried to eliminate the differences between vocal and instrumental sounds and **Meredith Monk**, notable for her vocal innovations, created a wide range of extended techniques that were first used during the 1960s and 70s.

One of the most influential vocalist/composers of our time is **Joan Linda La Barbara**. La Barbara can sing two or more pitches simultaneously[5] and is credited with promoting a new vocabulary of vocal sounds including trills, whispers, cries, sighs and inhaled tones. During the early 1970s she focused on vocal sounds rather than traditional pitches as the raw material for music, and explored techniques like *circular breathing*[6] and how to produce various timbres on a single pitch. By the mid-1970s La Barbara was writing structured compositions, some of which included electronics and layered vocal sounds. She has continued performing, composing and recording well into the 21st century.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3g4rVaXxOVY

Many contemporary composers are using these types of techniques to create absorbing musical experiences and several avant-garde groups like **The Crossing** (Philadelphia, PA) and **Roomful of Teeth** (North Adams, MA) are currently showcasing new vocal music. The Teeth describe themselves as a “vocal project dedicated to reimagining the expressive potential of the human voice. Through study with masters from vocal traditions the world over, the eight-voice ensemble continually expands its vocabulary of singing techniques...[The ensemble has] studied with some of the world’s top performers and teachers in Tuvan throat singing, yodeling, Broadway belting, Inuit throat singing, Korean P’ansori, Georgian singing, Sardinian cantu a tenore, Hindustani music, Persian classical singing and Death Metal singing.”[7]

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvYiHLHoe2g

The acclaimed a cappella group **Volti** (San Francisco, CA) often employs extended vocal techniques such as *microtones* (intervals smaller than a semitone), fragmented texts, sounds based on vowels and/or consonants and purely vocal sounds. Founder and Artistic Director Robert Geary's goal is to "use new music to open up sound spaces and horizons in your head; to help audiences see the potential for choral music....As for extended techniques we look back to Stockhausen, Berio, Ligeti, Cage, Penderecki and others. At this point I feel like extended techniques are widely used and not exclusively with avant-garde music...Once we got over the idea that music and singing were salon and church oriented, the palette of vocalism broadened.”[8]

According to Geary most of the compositions **Volti** performs are “edgy” although the repertoire includes more traditional pieces as well. The ensemble aims to intrigue audiences by avoiding the usual “safety nets” of choral music — religious contexts, familiar poetry, instrumental support,
functional harmony, traditional vocal techniques — in order to move audiences beyond their usual comfort zones.

Extended vocal techniques help composers create diverse sound worlds that stretch the ways listeners think about music. The best of these compositions can be surprising, adventurous, inventive, dramatic, haunting, soothing, jarring, moving—in other words, as engaging as any other style of music. This is vocal music with a different vocabulary where musical shapes and harmonies are often more important than actual word meanings and where unusual effects like fragmented texts, slides and yelps are transformed into striking vocal textures.

Using Stripsody as a starting point we can all celebrate extended vocal techniques by saying, once more with feeling: Honk! Bonk! Boing! Blomp! Ooh! Aah! And a cheery Woo, woo![9]

**Recommended Volti Recordings (Innova CDs):**

**House of Voices**

A well-chosen program of unaccompanied choral music by emerging and established composers that is challenging, stimulating and always intriguing. The music is accessible with timbres, harmonies and textures that will draw you back for repeated hearings.

One of the disc's highlights is Ted Hearne’s five-movement Privilege. During the first movement Hearne turns part of the text into a *Klangfarbenmelodie* — Schoenberg’s technique for dividing a musical line or melody among several instruments or voices instead of assigning it to one instrument.

**The Color of There Seen From Here**

Volti’s most recent disc includes Tonia Ko’s *From Ivory Depths*, a composition that engages your mind and ears through the use of textured soundscapes; Mark Winges' complex and intriguing *All Night* that is rich, dense and sparse — all at the same time; and Lithuanian composer Žibuoklė Martinaitytė’s soft and atmospheric *The Blue of Distance* that washes over you with speech sounds, humming and open vowels.

[1]The first piece written using this technique, Pierre Schaeffer’s 1948 composition *Etude aux chemins de fer* was created entirely from sounds found at a train station. For more about found sounds see “Ear Flaps Up: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Brahms” in issue #118 of *Copper*.

[2]The Moog synthesizer was used to create new pieces and reinterpret older compositions. One of the most popular LPs of electronic music for general audiences was Wendy Carlos’ *Switched on Bach* (1968).

[3]Some of the best known examples of wordless vocalizations include the original version of Rachmaninoff’s *Vocalise* for piano and solo voice (1915), the conclusion to Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe* (1912), the “Humming Chorus” from Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904), the “Neptune” movement of Holst’s *The Planets* (1916) and the wordless introduction to Heitor Villa-Lobos’ “Aria” from
Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5 (1930-45).

[4] *Sinfonia* was written in 1968 to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic.


[6] Producing a continuous tone without interruption by breathing in through the nose while simultaneously pushing air out through the mouth.

[7] Description from Roomful of Teeth website: roomfulofteeth.org

[8] Geary founded the San Francisco Chamber Singers in 1979 — an ensemble with the goal of discovering, creating and performing new, unaccompanied vocal music. The chorus started focusing entirely on contemporary music during the 2003-2004 season and because the name of the ensemble implied looking back at older repertoire instead of forward to new works, SFCS changed its name to Volti — a reference to the Italian musical term "volti subito" meaning "turn [the page] quickly, look ahead!"

[9] For some do it yourself experiments refer to *MouthSounds: How to Whistle, Pop, Boing, and Honk... for all occasions and then some* (Workman Press, 2004).

*Header image of Roomful of Teeth courtesy of Roomful of Teeth/Bonica Ayala of Bonica Ayala Photography.*
This past March Round Records released *GarciaLive Volume 13*. The Grateful Dead’s output over the prior twelve months had already been prolific so it was surprising to see another Jerry Garcia-related record hit the market. What was even more surprising was that this particular concert featured Clarence Clemons, longtime E Street Band member and Bruce Springsteen’s favorite onstage comic foil. I had never known Clarence to have shared the stage with almost anyone other than Bruce. So it really caught me off guard to learn that there was an *entire* concert that he had performed with Jerry Garcia. As I went down this rabbit hole I quickly learned there was more than this one show and that I and some famous others had missed an important part of musical history.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGfthfnerA

In 1989 Bruce Springsteen informed the E Street Band (and very soon thereafter the public) that he would no longer be in need of their services. He had already recorded a solo record in *Nebraska* and his most recent release, *Tunnel of Love*, was very much the same kind of singular affair. Here and there he deployed keyboardist Roy Bittan and he wove in the backup vocals of his wife Patti Scialfa. But it was pretty much Bruce doing everything from playing almost all of the instruments to producing each track. It worked. Bruce had tested the waters and he had proven to himself that he could create music outside of the E Street realm and have success.
The decision to go it alone began with suggestions made to him repeatedly over the prior two years by friends Sting and Billy Joel. Both expressed how much freedom they felt by separating themselves from the musicians that they had been with for so long. By bringing in new talent for support, their music had grown in ways that it never could have if they had stayed committed to their original lineups.

It’s hard to say whether that was true. Both Sting and Billy Joel did create music after parting with their bands (the Police in Sting’s case) that differed largely from their best-known sounds. (Billy Joel’s River of Dreams was quite different from his previous work.) But I do believe that Sting could have explored much of what interested him with fellow Police bandmates Andy Summers and Stewart Copeland. In the case of Bruce, he didn’t have to make the decision seem so infinite in scope – especially since the studio music that followed with 1992’s Lucky Town and Human Touch albums didn’t stray very much from his “working man” sound and persona. In the end it really doesn’t matter. The decision Bruce made was definitive enough that it convinced drummer Max Weinberg go to law school and find another way to make a living. For other E Streeters it meant trying to lock down the next gig.

Clarence Clemons did his own testing of the waters by joining Ringo Starr’s All Star Band. There he discovered what it was like to separate himself from such a longtime musical collaboration. That freedom gave Clarence room to operate outside of the carefully-crafted margins that his playing was confined to at any given Bruce show. Bruce was known to meticulously draft the sax solos and fills that populate his studio work and insist that Clarence use those borders as checkpoints when performing live. Conversely, Ringo Starr is famously known for encouraging members of his All Starr Band to go with what they’re feeling at that moment. This experience with a different mentor had to open Clarence up to almost any possibility. I now know that one of them involved Jerry Garcia and The Grateful Dead.

So I bought the new Jerry Garcia Band record and quickly fell in love with all of the Clarence Clemons contributions. There are certainly many Garcia band records out there with many of these same tunes performed and recorded masterfully. But Clemons added this King Curtis early 1960s soulfulness to songs I already associated so closely to Jerry – even if almost all of them were covers. The music had more of a clubhouse feel and moved along with a bit of jump in its step. What also became clear was that Clemons soloed very much in the way that Jerry himself did. The solos were melodic and sailed along with the song instead of piercing and pulling it forward. In every way they seemed made for each other and the music they created together twisted together tightly like the perfect sailing knot.

Here's a link to song samples on the Garcia Family Provisions site.

So you would have thought that these performances would have made a little bit of noise. If they did and I missed it I wasn’t alone. This summer I interviewed Steve Van Zandt and Nils Lofgren a week apart. At the end of both chats I mentioned that I was spinning this new Garcia release and raved about how great Clarence sounded on every track. Not only didn’t Steve or Nils know anything about the record, they had no idea he had ever played with Jerry Garcia. The mystery suddenly deepened and would soon take its ultimate turn.

I recently learned this was only one of many such performances during the year and a half between 1988 and 1989. They all were heading to a place where the idea that Clarence Clemons might actually join The Grateful Dead and become a full-fledged member of the band was becoming very real.
I had the opportunity to speak with official Grateful Dead archivist David Lemieux about this rare moment in rock. Here’s what he had to say about this perfect musical pairing and the rumors that followed:

“I was at the first show where Clarence Clemons joined the band. It was New Year’s Eve 1988 in Oakland, and The Dead opened the show with “Let the Good Times Roll” [and] ‘Franklin’s Tower.’ They followed that up with ‘Wang Dang Doodle’ and out comes this sax player. We all immediate realized that, ‘oh my God, that’s Clarence Clemons!’ You have to remember that this is 1988 and Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band are still pretty huge so everyone knew who this was. Later in May of 1989 he sat in at the Oakland stadium AIDS benefit. Then came the big news with the September tour of the Jerry Garcia Band through the East Coast (which was really the band’s first big tour where he played big venues). Clarence sat in for all the shows on the second half of that tour.

I saw him again the first night of the New Year’s run going into 1989. He sat in for ‘Iko Iko’ and as it goes, the story I heard, was that Jerry and Bob enjoyed playing with him so much that there was loose talk of him joining the band. It didn’t go anywhere, and I’m not sure if the other four guys [in the Grateful Dead] were into it. I also don’t know if Clarence’s schedule would permit it. You know The Dead did have some experience a year later when Bruce Hornsby was kind of an occasional member. He was mostly full-time but he missed quite a few shows because of his own schedule.

Jerry and Bob and Clarence loved hanging out together but it didn’t last long. It was about a year to a year and a half, late 1988 through 1989. I think that Clarence added something that The Dead really enjoyed having on that stage. It was a big powerful horn sound and a big presence. He was also a soloist. The Dead, as much as Jerry certainly soloed, they weren’t a band of soloists. I only saw Bruce and the E Street Band once and I remember that it was three hours of intensity and there were a lot of solos from a lot of different people. The Dead didn’t quite do that and Clarence certainly added that element.

I don’t know how the friendship started but I do know that for that brief period the guys, particularly Bob and Jerry, loved playing with him. It’s funny because around 2010, 2011 when Bob and Phil had the band Furthur, they were touring and they played a show in Boca Raton, Florida where my mother spends her winters. So I sent her to the show and they set her up with passes, tickets and stuff and Clarence Clemons sat in. Not long after that performance, maybe a month or so, he passed away. So it turns out that his last public appearance was with these guys. Period.”

While there’s arguably no “fitting end” to a career as dynamic as that of Clarence Clemons it was indeed fitting that if not with E Street that he would make his last public appearance on stage with guys from the Dead. It begs the question of what the Grateful Dead’s output might have been like in the five years between that first appearance in Oakland and Jerry’s death in 1995 and whether Clarence might have helped get the band back in the studio for one last cut. Like the addition of the Godchauxs, and the various keyboardists who held down duties with the Dead over their remarkable run, each helped shape and shift the Grateful Dead’s sound. As you listen to the recently-released Jerry Garcia Band tracks with Clarence Clemons you can only imagine how Jerry and The Big Man might have “bust this city in half.” Somewhere right now they might be doing just that.
Changers in the Night

AUDIO ANTHROPOLOGY

Written by Frank Doris
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You're driving through the New Mexico desert in the dark. Your teeth are grinding, though the buzz of the blue meth or whatever you were on has long worn off and you don't remember where you were or where you are going. Just driving, with an AM radio with a busted antenna that must have been torn off in a street fight, but you don't remember whether you or some vandal with whom you had some mild disagreement used it as a weapon. The sky is full of stars and the occasional untethered, shape-shifting airborne vehicle that has the radio playing nothing but static. You're not in Roswell but not that far from it, either.

You go over a ridge and there's a faint signal at the lowest part of the AM dial, almost longwave, the part of the radio spectrum where sounds don't travel very far. It's the deadpan voice of a preacher. He's totally unexcited, unlike most radio evangelists. He doesn't shout, it's like he's reading the Bible to himself. With musicians playing in the background, it sounds like Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah, where G-d has ordered Abraham to sacrifice his child.

The preacher recites the verse, but it's not exactly like the Old Testament. More like a paraphrase: "God said to Abraham, kill me a son/Abe said, man, you must be puttin' me on." You know these words like you know your name. (If you could remember your name.) It is the title song to Bob
Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*. But it doesn't have that manic swing, the amphetamine-in-the-molecular structure of the original. You've heard hundreds upon hundreds of Dylan covers in the 55 years since this song, this album, entered your consciousness, but you've never engaged this kind of thing before.

It's Dave Alvin singing and playing "Highway 61 Revisited" on his new album, *From An Old Guitar: Rare and Unreleased Recordings*. This is not a random collection of scenes from the cutting room floor. Though recorded over a number of years, with different configurations of musicians but a steady, dedicated core of his fellow travelers, it seems as carefully constructed as any new release. It is as if he was a much younger man and aiming for the charts, the way he did with the Blasters in the late 1970s, when for a short time the focus of both the industry and the critics who once had influence saw the future of rock and roll was once again, and not for the first time, in Los Angeles.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uFLQFyIYLg&feature=youtu.be

The Blasters were the heartbeat of a roots rock scene that somebody wanted to label as punk, or new wave, because that's what it was. The Blasters and two of its Slash Records label confreres formed a powerful triad: X, with Exena and John Doe, were the Tammy Wynette and George Jones of LA punk, while Los Lobos brought the myths and realities of Mexican East Los Angeles to the mainstream.

The scene, to the Blasters and company, was not Sunset Strip or Laurel Canyon, but a whole kind of downward mobility you might find on the periphery of the California dream, from the oil derricks of Long Beach that Alvin cites in the closing song, his own "Signal Hill Blues," to the backbeat of Bakersfield, where Buck Owens and Merle Haggard kept playing country music while Nashville turned out some artificially flavored version of the real thing. Bill Morrissey's "Inside," is a kind of scene setter for this album, and Alvin's approach to California music: "It ain't Hollywood, not Venice or Malibu."

It took a while for Alvin to find his voice. In the Blasters, remember, it was his brother Phil Alvin with the golden throat, Dave with the songs and the blessed guitar. When the Blasters went their ways with typical brotherly acrimony (since reconciliated, as suggested in a wonderful song called "What's Up With Your Brother?" from Alvin's previous best solo album, *Eleven Eleven*), Dave's solo career has been so prolific it's hard to keep track.

*Eleven Eleven* (2011) is where Dave really found his voice, and I mean that in all kinds of ways. Like Bob Dylan, Randy Newman, Leonard Cohen and other ace writers whose material first thrived when sung by others, Dave's one-and-a-fraction octave range reminds me of something Linda Ronstadt once said: "There are three elements of singing: story, voice, and musicianship." Storytelling comes first, and Dave Alvin has grown into one of our finest storytellers, whether he makes them up himself or extracts nuggets from some hidden American songbook.

Many of the players on *From an Old Guitar* are or have been moving parts of a sequence of Alvin's bands, such as the Guilty Men, the Guilty Women (an all-female entourage), and the Guilty Ones. They include Greg Leisz and Rick Shea on pedal steel, Danny Ott on guitars, Bob Glaub or Gregory Boaz on bass, Don Heffington, (drums), Christy McWilson on vocals, Lisa Pankratz on drums, and Chris Gaffney on accordion.
Gaffney died in 2008, but as recently as 2019 Alvin and friends were still putting on tribute shows for Gaffney, whose squeezebox takes the place of an entire horn section on Peter Case's "On the Way Downtown," a song about a time when city lights burned bright, promising a good time, or at least an opportunity to get lost seeking one. But to continue our story:

You feel like you've pulled off that desert highway at 3 am, and there's a roadhouse band featuring Gaffney alongside Alvin playing "Variations on Earl Hooker's Guitar Rhumba." People are listening to the music, smoking cigarettes, and drinking cans of Coors Light, except for vampires sipping from the extensive menu of Bloody Marys: A casual waitress, chewing gum and dressed in cowboy hat, denim, white blouse and black string-tie, will ask, "type A, B, AB, or O, positive or negative?" AB negative costs $10,000 a shot, and if you order that, you will be taken to a secret room, where you will be shot, your blood donated to the Red Cross.

The traveler orders hot black coffee and a shot of rye. Gaffney takes charge of "Amanda," a ballad of sorts and one of the hundreds of hits by reclusive Nashville songwriter Robert Lee McDill. You might have heard Waylon Jennings' version. The band changes moods, accelerates with the good time swing of late hippie-era Doug Sahm's "Dynamite Woman," a relic from a time when everything, from pretty good to awesome, was "dynamite" (but not yet "dyn-o-mite")!

There are some oddities that throw the listener: There's the reassuring sound of a Willie Dixon 12-bar blues, a seldom heard 1971 anti-war song called "Peace?" from one of Dixon's solo albums. Dixon was probably trying to reach college kids who had discovered his work through the Stones and Yardbirds and Cream. The traveler puts some cream, an extra spoonful of sugar and another shot of golden rye in his coffee. Next, an old Marty Robbins song, but not "El Paso," where our traveler is heading, but an environmental protest song called "Man Walks Among Us." It is basically about birds and animals in the forest talking to each other, warning each other to watch out, because man is coming around and spoiling their once pristine home.
Man. The Man. Our traveler remembers that he is running from a man, or The Man. He goes out to the parking lot, checks his headlights and taillights, making sure there's no rational excuse for him to be pulled over. He's sticking as close to the speed limit on the outskirts of "Albuquerque," which happens to be the name of the song he's turning to on the radio. He knows the sheriffs in these parts have a reputation: In 2014, after a two year investigation, the U.S. Justice Department Civil Rights Division and the US Attorney's Office for the District of New Mexico found the Albuquerque PD had a prolific pattern of using excessive lethal and less than lethal force in a whole range of unnecessary situations.

The song, "Albuquerque," is about an entirely different state of mind, written by a Cajun musician named Link Davis, who recorded it in 1966 under the name Link "Big Mamou" Davis. The single was produced by Huey Meaux and released on the Princess label out of Pasadena, Texas. Dave Alvin, from working class Downey, California, about a half hour south of the posh Pasadena of the old money and the Rose Bowl, probably finds this amusing, as will you. This "Albuquerque" rocks wild; it sounds like the kind of place you'd want to go on spring break, but then again, anybody nicknamed "Big Mamou" takes the party wherever he goes.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOGeWQAMIP0

Driving out of Albuquerque on I-25 South, the traveler is heading for Las Cruces, listening to Alvin and his band play the instrumental "Perdido Street Blues," by Lil Hardin Armstrong, and originally recorded in 1926 by Louis Armstrong and the Hot Five, or the Hot Five with Lil but not Louis, or some variation with a different name. But he misreads the map and instead of Las Cruces, he stumble into nearby New Crobuzon, a creation of the self-described "weird fiction" writer China Miéville, in his novel *Perdido Street Station*.

The station is an excellent place to lay low for a while, to be invisible. There's a jukebox in the station café where what sounds like another Bob Dylan song is playing, a possible outtake from *Highway 61 Revisited*. The song, "Beautiful City 'Cross the River" is a Dave Alvin original, starting with a hushed choir, kicking into gear with Chuck Berry licks, and shot through with paranoia.

This song speaks to our traveler. He leaves New Crobuzon/Las Cruces and realizes he is quite near El Paso, Texas, the destination of "Beautiful City 'Cross the River."

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_oOk0eB04M

Alvin certainly has a sense of humor. One line goes, "I drove three long days to El Paso/with a bag full of cash and visions of Mexico" and his foxhole prayer is that god deliver him to that beautiful city across the river. Which is Juarez, Mexico, which in 2008 had the highest murder rate per capita in the world. Our man on the run did not think through his plan.

While he ponders his odds, the album ends with "Signal Hill Blues." It's a reverie about an old time lover's lane among the oil derricks of Long Beach, California, where a young man is singing a story song about being in a car with a woman twice his age, but looking pretty good. They sip some whiskey, they pass out, and when they wake up, nothing much has happened, and they wonder if it's all been just a dream.
In 1980 I find myself working on another bus tour in Europe. Jim Kellem of CMA (Creative Management Associates, later ICM Partners) calls and says that an acquaintance of his is manager of Johnny “Guitar” Watson. There is a tour of Germany and Spain scheduled, and the manager cannot go because he is working on the movie *Take This Job and Shove It*. I am not familiar with Johnny “Guitar” Watson, but things seem on the level and it is a pretty short tour, so I say OK and sign on.

Johnny “Guitar” Watson (1935 – 1996) started out as a blues artist in the 1950s, moving to soul and funk by the 1970s. His distinctive stinging, cutting guitar style was characterized by plucking the strings with his fingers and using a capo to change keys. He was a flamboyant performer who liked outlandish clothes, and had success with his song “Gangster of Love,” “A Real Mother for Ya” and others. Frank Zappa said Watson’s “Three Hours Past Midnight” inspired him to play guitar.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COall7GQJTA

I am advised to call Beverly Woodman; she is Johnny’s sister, and day-to-day manager. I make contact and we go over tour details and I ask her if she can wire my first week’s pay into my bank account before we leave. No problem. She explains to me that she lives her life on the straight and narrow. She carries her Bible everywhere.

We fly into Frankfurt and the first concert takes place the next evening. I seek out Beverly because I had checked before I had left New York and the money had not arrived at my bank. I ask Beverly about the money and she assures me that she wired it into my account and everything is fine. Since I’m in Germany I cannot check so I must take her word for it.
The first date will be at the Stadthalle Offenbach, a concert hall with the capacity of 2,000. This represents the type of venues we will be playing in Europe: older concert halls in good shape, acoustically sound and very ornate. Kind of cool.

The afternoon before the first show I am introduced to everyone and we board our tour bus for the short ride to the concert hall. Johnny has an assistant, and he sits next to me on the bus and starts to give me the lay of the land. He tells me Johnny is a preacher and a pimp. Johnny is across the aisle and one seat forward up towards the front of the bus, and he turns around and gives me a big smile. All right, I think to myself, so Johnny is not just a musician but also religious and a gangster.

That night the show was amazing. Really incredible. I was totally impressed. The show flowed back and forth like a beautiful stream. Johnny didn’t just sing and play incredible guitar; he mixed things up. The show featured Randi Redman, this beautiful Black gal with an incredible voice. Then there was J.J., a piano player and singer who had a tremendous stage personality. J.J., a young guy in his early twenties, was entertaining and lovable. There was not a person in the hall who was not totally taken by him.

Of course the key ingredient in the mix was Johnny with his smooth singing and guitar playing that
was just outta sight. Watching Johnny work his magic with the guitar, I could not help but think that he reminds me of a combination of Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix and one of his mentors, T-Bone Walker. But wait a minute.

An alarm went off in my head. Johnny is easily 15 or 20 years older than any of them, so it might be correct to think that they inherited something from him. Hmmm, being the first at something doesn’t always mean that you’ll be the one who’s the most successful at it. Sometimes the one who did it first does not get the credit they deserve, or is even acknowledged at all. But is anyone really “the first,” or are we all just pushing forward what has come before?

I ask you, our readers, for your comments and any information you might have about Johnny “Guitar Watson” (on his style, his influences or his history) to start a dialog in the Comments area below.

Next day we are on the bus to Cologne/Duesseldorf to play at the Philipshalle that night, another beautiful facility. I do not see Johnny on the bus, and ask Beverly where he is. She says he is either flying to the next gig or being driven by limousine, and we will not see him on the bus very often.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8MviTtXkF0

The show that night was awesome again, in one of the biggest concert halls we would play during the tour. My hat is off to Johnny “Guitar” Watson as he put together a very entertaining show. It is not easy to do that and I speak from experience. [See Ken’s article about the Peace Parade in Issue 118 – Ed.]

There was no opening act on the Johnny “Guitar” Watson tour. It was a much shorter show then the ones I usually was part of, about 75 to 90 minutes in all.

As the tour went on, I became more friendly with the band, which by the way was particularly good, especially considering that they had just formed for this tour. I was surprised; I mean, this is not unheard of, but they were really tight and together. One of them mentioned that before getting this gig, he was a census taker. I was truly surprised, and it bothered me that such a talented musician in Los Angeles couldn’t find work and had to take a temporary job as a census taker just to keep body and soul together.
We had a date in Barcelona, and had to cross France to get to Spain. At customs in France they pulled all of us off the bus. While standing there I looked back at the bus and every window was greased up. What an odd sight! It took a moment for me to figure out why. Everyone in the band was using Jheri Curl on their hair. Jheri Curl was greasy, and when they leaned their heads on the window it smeared the window big time. It was popular in the 1980s. In a half hour or so the customs officials let us pass and we start driving through the South of France.

Later that night we are in Lyon and lost and can’t find our hotel, or I should say, the bus driver is lost. We stop in front of a neighborhood bar and I go in to ask directions to our hotel. I walk in and there are about 20 men in the establishment. I ask the bartender for directions. Of course, no one in the bar can speak any English, but everyone in the place comes over trying to help. They pile outside of the bar to look at this big bus on their tiny street and they get the bus driver and with a map and hand signals they point out the correct way. Their friendship is a nice experience, and if we hadn’t been riding for so many hours I would have suggested going in for a drink, but everyone is really bushed. So, we drive off, waving goodbye to our new friends.

We get to the hotel, check in and once in my room I call my wife in New York. She answers and is quite annoyed. “It is 4 o’clock in the morning! you woke me up!” “Oh, I’m sorry,” I replied; “did you get the money from JGWs people?” “No,” she says, “and good night,” and she hangs up on me. Next morning when I check out, I get a room charge for $21 for my 40-second phone call. “What is with this big phone bill?” I say to the people at the front desk and they just shrug. That was the last personal long-distance phone call I ever made from a hotel room.
On the bus I tell Beverly that the money has not arrived, and she said, “I sent it, maybe it will be there tomorrow.” But I’m starting to doubt her.

Arriving in Barcelona that day we go to a tremendous arena. This is a festival, but what kind of festival I do not know. This arena is easily 400 years old and immense. However, our dressing or staging area is out in the open, and Randi needs to change and there is no privacy. So, both of us go in search of a changing area. We start walking through huge this circular arena looking for a ladies room or something private. And do we walk! This place really is tremendous. At one point we passed a boxing area where as many as 30 fighters were working out on punching bags and even a ring with two fighters sparring in it; it was a full-scale boxing gym. Finally, we find a small L-shaped area where she could have some privacy while I stood guard. When she was ready, we started the long walk back. Halfway there some guy goes running past us and right behind him is a policeman chasing him. Right in front of us the policeman tackles him and starts beating the guy with his night stick. “What is that?” Randi asks. “I guess the guy tried to sneak in,” I answered. “That is a pretty drastic response, don’t you think?” “Yeah,” I say, “Violent, but who knows what is going on. “We made a wide circle walking around and past the struggle.

Back to Germany on a long overnight bus ride with no stopping that night. We arrive in Mannheim the next day around noon. The show tonight is at Musensaal, 1,800 seats, a lovely concert hall. Tonight’s show is sold out, like many are on this tour. These international tours are interesting and different and I love the exposure to different cultures.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z35fOObuE78

The majority of international performers want to tour the States, but conversely, there are some American acts that thrive in Europe and the Far East but not so much at home. That being said, I accept that it is a big world entertainment-wise, with different tastes and biases. When the day comes that we all start traveling again, I suggest that you check out international talent and shows; you will find some amazing entertainment off the beaten path. For example, on the Stranglers tour (see article in Issue 111) a special event for me was catching Wang Chung play their first show ever in London on the Chinese New Year.

We finished the tour with dates in Hanover and Hamburg. The night after the last show Johnny was in a bad mood, giving grief to the band and shooting me dirty looks. I don’t know why but he was unhappy with that night’s performance. That evening was the last time I saw him.
Early the next afternoon I board a TWA 747 for the flight back to New York. As I am walking the aisle to my seat I notice yesterday’s New York Post lying on an open seat and the headline is of the volcanic eruption of Mount St Helens. Wow, shocking. I had no idea. While touring, you are in a bubble far removed from the news of the day.

My plane lands at JFK in the late afternoon and I take a taxi back to our duplex apartment on East 18th Street. I unpack, throwing my dirty laundry in the hamper and about an hour later my wife comes home from work. She was happy to see me.

Next day I check with my bank and guess what? My first week’s pay had never arrived. I am not happy about it but I am not surprised either. A first for me as a road manager but life goes on.

Postscript: Johnny “Guitar” Watson passed away from a heart attack on May 17, 1996 while playing a concert in Yokohama, Japan. One report said the heart attack happened backstage and another said it happened within moments of him going on stage. Bad drugs? Maybe quite likely in my opinion, but Japan is not a country known for drugs or drug usage so who knows if some idiot might had have given him something tainted. Johnny liked to party, but he was smooth, not overweight, and I do not remember him smoking. He did not have the charm of Jimi Hendrix but he had the talent.
Here’s a question that should be a softball: who was Europe’s single most influential musician in the early 19th century?

Was it Beethoven? After all, we had hoped to celebrate the 250th anniversary of his birth with interplanetary zeal, including copious performances, new recordings, etc. etc.

But what if I told you that Gioachino Antonio Rossini (1792–1868) was that “single most influential musician”? At the very least, he gave Ludwig Van stiff competition back in the day, succeeding in the one genre Beethoven never conquered.

Rossini, an Italian born in Pesaro, wrote 39 operas - the first of them when he was 18 - and then exited the opera scene before he was 40. We know he was tired; perhaps he was also bored. And he could see a big musical shift coming - the dawn of Romanticism - that would require him to work a whole lot harder (more about that below). Rossini’s operas had been enormously successful everywhere, imitated but never surpassed, at least in the public’s eyes. And he was rich.

When Beethoven died in 1827, he was not rich. His influence on younger composers had also waned, partly the result of fallout from the experimental chamber music he wrote during his Late Period. Those works, mainly piano sonatas and string quartets, were neither understood nor appreciated at the time. Beethoven’s reputation among musicians would grow in later years: Robert Schumann, a talented younger composer and journalist, belonged to an emerging generation that did appreciate their forebears, including Bach and Beethoven. And he made no effort to hide his contempt for Pesaro’s bel canto master:
Near the end of the year 1833 there met in Leipzig . . . a number of musicians, chiefly younger men, primarily for social companionship [but] not less for an exchange of ideas about the art which was for them the meat and drink of life – music. It cannot be said that musical conditions in Germany were particularly encouraging at the time. On the stage Rossini still ruled, at the piano Herz and Hünten. And yet only a few years had elapsed since Beethoven, Weber, and Schubert had lived among us. [from Davidsbündlerblätter, 1854]

There are many ways to measure the talent or significance of a composer. For music lovers, initial impressions do matter. If your first taste of Classic opera buffa came via Mozart in, say, Le nozze di Figaro or Così fan tutte, you may experience your first Rossini opera with mingled delight and disappointment. Yes, the vocal fireworks can be stunning – they fizz like prosecco, if not champagne. But heard in sequence, some elements may strike you sometimes as formulaic, uneven in quality, or overly inclined to run a good joke into the ground.

Consider Act One of Il barbiere di Siviglia. This paradigm of Rossinian style is easily his most-often produced opera. Beethoven liked it; so did Verdi. As music, it breaks down into a succession of “numbers,” e.g., arias, duets, trios, or larger ensemble pieces in so-called closed forms – distinctive structures that include a beginning and an ending. Fun fact: they’re called “numbers” because in the score, each is assigned a different number in ascending sequence; see below.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSjyDH4MJCc

Timings for the opera’s first ten numbers are also given below; my remarks follow the numbered list. Before you read what I have to say, why not watch some of Il barbiere? If you get restless you can skip ahead to the next number (or over a number entirely), then compare your reactions with mine. These ten numbers are preceded by an Overture.

1. Introduction (8:02): “Piano, pianissimo” (Numbers are typically introduced and/or interrupted with recitative, quick speech-like singing.)
2. Cavatina/cabaletta (11:00): “Ecco ridente in cielo” (Almaviva)
3. Continuation and stretta of Introduction: “Ehi, Fiorello!”
4. [Cabaletta] (18:19): “Largo al factotum” (Figaro)
6. Recit./Duet (33:20): “Oh cielo!/Nella stanza/All’ idea di quel metallo” (Figaro, Almaviva)
7. Cavatina/Cabaletta (41:36): “Una voce poco fa/Io sono docile” (Rosina)
8. Aria (52:14): “La calunnia” (Basilio)
9. Duet ((1:00:02): “Dunque io son” (Rosina, Figaro)
10. Aria (1:06:37): “A un dottor della mia sorte” (Bartolo)

Which takes us well into Act II, ending with a riotous stretta featuring all five principals, the housemaid, and a chorus of soldiers. My thoughts:

The orchestra’s overture calls the audience to attention and provides characteristic musical energy for what’s to come. These days, directors often stage the overture, providing pantomime or dance accompaniment to the music. Sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn’t. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s film version of La Cenerentola (a Rossini-ized retelling of “Cinderella”) makes a sly statement about Rossini’s basic style by filming its overture in the vast, empty interior of La Scala, a succession of gleaming surfaces bereft of actual human presence:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbEHi7oG8M
(1, 2) How to get the actual drama underway? Always tricky. Here we meet Almaviva paying a troupe of musicians to accompany his serenade to Rosina, a young woman he saw in the streets of Madrid. Note the lyrical quality of Almaviva’s tenor voice. His music requires almost as much agility, grace, and speed as anything written for the women. As the 19th century progressed, such “Rossini tenors” were eclipsed by singers capable of louder, more heroic utterances. The category of Lovesick Youth was more likely to be consigned to mezzo-sopranos as a trouser role.

(4) Here’s the aria made famous by Bugs Bunny and others. Quick-witted Figaro, a barber and all-round entrepreneur, introduces himself as the guy who can make it happen, whatever “it” turns out to be. This is a patter song: lots of repeated, rapidly articulated wordplay plus occasional shout-outs to extremely high or low notes. Note that he’s playing directly to the audience here, ignoring the fourth wall. He has yet to encounter his newest client, Almaviva, who, like Figaro, is new in Seville.

(5) Figaro convinces Almaviva to try serenading Rosina again, making two of the first five numbers cavatinas for the principal tenor. Neither song advances the plot, but it’s early enough in the evening that we don’t feel seriously held up.

(6) Figaro and Almaviva negotiate a business relationship. This duet calls for real acting skill and a clever stage director: we have a chance to gain insight into these two young men and their partnership. The music doesn’t spell much of that out, but some creative stage interplay here between master and servant could suggest mutual understanding and a shared spirit of adventure; otherwise this Ode to Filthy Lucre may fall flat. (I think Luigi Alva and Hermann Prey do a pretty good job with it.)

(7) At last, the prima donna sings! We’ve gotten tantalizing glimpses of her at the balcony, but this is her first opportunity to present herself freely and at length. (Since, like Figaro, she’s ignoring the fourth wall, we can safely assume she’s not dissembling.) Her dreamy teenage enthusiasm momentarily gives way to rapid patter as she schemes to overcome her keepers, and she finishes the cavatina with “lo giurai, la vincerò!” (“I swear, I’ll win it!”) The ensuing cabaletta is all about her willful, wily ways. Aside from being a vocal showpiece, the aria should make us fully aware that this character is smart and determined. Almaviva and Figaro should be grateful she’s on their side.

(8, 10) Two of the last three numbers are patter songs for two buffo bassi, the comic bass singers essential to any opera buffa. Rossini’s audiences were apparently addicted to watching grown men
issue torrents of sibilant syllables, as in these numbers; I can’t say it sets my heart aflame. “La calunnia” is often cited as an example of Rossini’s ability to orchestrate a continuous crescendo that, like a raging flood, eventually consumes everything in its path. We’re talking about a purely orchestral effect, one easily detached from emotional signifiers: here it represents the toxic power of gossip. If the singer is going to express any personal investment (like fiendishly evil delight!), he’ll have to compete with the orchestra for attention. I’m glad that, thirty years earlier, Mozart made his Basilio a comic tenor. Having two buffo bassi plus Figaro in the same opera strikes me as overkill.

If you made it all the way to that “riotous stretta” forming the finale of Act II, you may have been bowled over by its shift from silly subterfuge into utter madness. Well, that’s what an ensemble finale ought to do! On the other hand, perhaps your willing suspension of disbelief got momentarily un-suspended, because of the way the stage was suddenly filled with loud, passionate strangers. It’s not as well integrated with immediately preceding story elements as in, say, a Mozart comedy. We can’t scold Rossini for not being Mozart, but moments like this do reveal just how paper-thin the artifice can get. (Pie-throwing is more fun when the tossing of pastries seems organically motivated.)

Recommendations: beyond Ponnelle’s film, there are some very fine performances on record (consider those conducted by Galliera, Humburg, Abbado, and Marriner here) and DVD, not to mention Met Opera on Demand. La Cenerentola is another Rossini comedy you might enjoy. Ponnelle’s film, above, features Frederica von Stade in one of her finest roles. I also like Garanča in the 2009 Met production, available both in Blu-ray and online, and the 2005 Glyndebourne production with Ruxandra Donose.

Throughout his lifetime, Rossini also turned out extremely successful opera seria. In the past thirty years his serious operas have regained respect, and not just from aficionados; I really should end this column by recommending one. But there’s no way to do justice to that Rossini, a proper tragedian and budding Romantic, in one or two sentences. It’ll take a whole ‘nother column.

In the meantime, I can recommend a couple of Greatest Hits albums. A superlative new Rossini collection, Amici e Rivali, from tenors Lawrence Brownlee and Michael Spyres, includes gorgeous, technically astonishing duets and other ensembles from Otello, La donna del lago, and, yes, Il barbiere. Here’s a sneak peek:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydj70aPIMIA
In TMT's December 28 end-of-year “awards” column, I’ll also heap praise on a Rossini aria collection from mezzo-soprano Karine Deshayes. Hope you’ll check that out.
“I even have dreams where I am as messed up as I really am - I’ve found myself trying to play in my dreams, but it’s just like real life.” – Keith Jarrett

It’s hard for me to imagine a world without Keith Jarrett.

For those who don’t know what I’m writing about:

KEITH JARRETT TELLS NEW YORK TIMES HE’S UNLIKELY TO PERFORM LIVE AGAIN

I don’t know about you, but for me, this is truly terrible news, of just about the worst sort. I take it very personally. This is as if the Hand of God reached into my life and removed one of my principal touchstones.

I’ve listened to Mr. Jarrett’s improvisational piano recordings (he calls them “spontaneous compositions” - or used to, at least) for nearly 50 years - from 1973’s Solo Concerts: Bremen/Lausanne on. Add to this the fact that I had a stroke in 2013 that was a bit difficult to come back from, and I just find this hard to adjust to. I know we’re all aging - but Mr. Jarrett is a giant, like Glenn Gould. He should be immortal and perennially in good health.

For an example of what I love, listen to the ending of Lausanne - that gentle hammering of 16ths, so hypnotic and melodic. Or the thing that convinced me in the first place: the parts of Solo Concerts where he gets into a rolling, gospel-like feel.

I’ve seen him spontaneously composing maybe half a dozen times. The first time I saw him, in 1975 at the Newport Jazz Festival, he was with his famous mid-70s quartet of Dewey Redman, Paul
Motian and Charlie Haden. The next time was solo in the gym (A GYM! CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?) at the University of California San Diego. But the event I recall the best was the most recent. When my daughter Claire was 12 (going on 80, to hear her tell it), after a very long absence, Jarrett came to town – to the Walt Disney Concert Hall, home of the LA Phil. The moment my wife mentioned the ad she was saw in the paper, I leapt on the interwebs and bought two tickets – for Claire and me. At Disney, for an event like this, they sell tickets in the choir seats; that is, behind the main stage. I (very cleverly – a point of pride – can you tell?) got tickets where Claire could watch his hands: behind, above, and seen from the front of the stage, to his left.

I’ll always remember her response. At the end, he received 12 curtain calls and performed three encores. As the number of curtain calls increased, she looked as if the eyes were bugging out of her head, and fairly shouted at me, over the yelling of the audience: “Dad! Dad!” Nothing could contain the audience’s excitement – or our own. (He was even complementary of the crowd that evening.)

And now, like so much else in this season of the pandemic – that’s done. Over.

Yes: I take this one personally.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHYJ_IdHJG0

Postscript: a few favorite recordings.

Solo Concerts: Bremen/Lausanne (the first of his live solo recordings, 1973)
The Koln Concert (it is great, though overplayed, 1975)
The Sun Bear Concerts (a 10-LP, 6-CD set, recorded in 1976 in Japan)
Paris Concert (1988)
Paris / London (2009)

Header image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Olivier Bruchez, cropped to fit format.
Who hasn't walked out of a show, turned to a friend and said, "that really sucked," or, "that was amazing!"

Everyone has the capacity to be a critic.

My recent review of the 50th anniversary reissue of Workingman’s Dead, however positive, incurred the wrath of Grateful Dead fans who questioned my musical sensibilities.

In yet a different article I got a comment that basically was the equivalent of the old anti-Vietnam War protestors’ manifesto, “America, love it or leave it.” The comment basically said, “I don’t see your name on a list of best guitarists,” implying that I’m not qualified to judge guitar players.

The last time I checked, the only requirement to being a critic is: Have an opinion!

I love writing. I wrote my first professional piece for Inc.com seven years ago and quickly got two more offers.

At first, my opinions about music and artists were not something I was comfortable writing about.

I know that may sound strange as I have a huge wealth of knowledge about all things music-related. [He’s not bragging; just stating fact. – Ed.] So much so, that I’ve started a new podcast which will be live by the time this article is published. It’s called “The French Connection: The Music Business and Beyond.” I also have an upcoming book titled Twisted Business: We’re Not Gonna Take It!

The truth is, however, that I doubt that many architectural critics have ever built a building, art
critics painted a painting or music critics played an instrument. They’re just people with opinions and a love for the subjects who are willing to put it out there.

How’s this for irony: The first real newspaper (Newsday) critic to review a Twisted Sister concert, Wayne Robins, now writes for Copper. Wayne tore us apart at the time (1978) and the backlash from our fans was incredible, defending us savagely. Me? The only thing I cared about was that he spelled all our names correctly. I loved it. Wayne and I had a back and forth about it recently when I found out he was writing for Copper.

Paul Stanley from KISS is famous for saying that his mansion was paid for by bad reviews.

In my world, you develop a very thick skin and that may be one of the reasons that I feel really good about when I feel compelled to make comments about artists.

I say what I say because it’s how I feel.

I am unshakeable about my perceptions and I don’t care if one agrees or not.

When I was 15, Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band was released and The New York Times critic Richard Goldstein panned it. It pretty much destroyed his career. He blasphemed!

Forget that years later, John Lennon called the album “rubbish” and Ringo has said that it was a fake concept album containing songs that had no connection, sewed together by George Martin and now revered as the first great concept album.

The point is that badly reviewing an icon can have interesting repercussions.

The Jimi Hendrix debut album Are You Experienced was reviewed by none other than Jon Landau, who panned it, but that didn’t seem to hit back at either Jon (who went on to become Bruce Springsteen’s manager) or Jimi.

Cream’s Wheels of Fire was so badly reviewed in Rolling Stone that Clapton famously broke up the group because of it.

The Magical Mystery Tour movie debacle a mere two months after the release of Sgt. Pepper’s made it easier to criticize the Beatles. However, the White Album, released eight months later in early 1968, brought the magic back in a very big way.

Somehow, none of the reviews I read back in the day really mattered as far as me liking or disliking an artist, but I did tend to buy anything that got a five-star rating in Rolling Stone. Sometimes I agreed, sometimes not. I just was more interested as to why a reviewer liked or didn’t like something.

I write what I love and what I don’t. It is way more fun than just to say, “it was OK.”

Fans of the Dead, Springsteen and Dylan in particular are fierce protectors of their artists. When considering the Beatles and the Stones, it’s more like being a Yankees fan. They are all monoliths. When a friend tells me he or she hates the Beatles I say, “please pass the salt.”

I mean really...what need is there to convince anyone of anything?

So here are some quick thumbnails that may cause some of you to boil over.
Springsteen: Before seeing Bruce and the E Street Band, I saw him twice as a special guest artist, once with Dave Edmunds and once at a Rainforest fundraiser in the 1990s. Both times his performance was strangely electrifying although I’m not a big fan of his voice.

The two times I saw him with his band, however, were very disappointing. So much so that I walked out before the end of both shows. The sound mix was terrible and he talked way too much and it bored me.

U2: Bono’s voice has always irritated me. He sounds like a hungry seal waiting to get fed a fish. The Edge? He says he’s not a good guitar player. He is correct.

Dylan: Love his voice and music. Worst concert I have seen in the last 10 years. A total embarrassment.

Rolling Stones: Made great albums from 1964 – 1972, good albums to 1980 and irrelevant ones since. From 1966 to 1972 (along with the Grateful Dead) maybe the world's greatest live band. Today? The only reason they aren't as awful as Dylan is that at least you can understand the words to the songs that they are totally screwing up.

Grateful Dead: Loved them from 1967 to 1972 as a one of the great live acts. Loved the drumming and bass playing. Garcia? Hated his guitar tone and ultimately tiring solos. At this point I had been “taken” by Eric, Jeff, Jimi, Jimmy, Terry Kath (Chicago) Mick Taylor, Albert King, Buddy Guy and Roy Buchanan. These players were very different. Most of the San Francisco bands, many of whom I really liked, never had guitar players that really stood out. I didn’t like the style or the guitar tones of Jorma, John Cipollina (Quicksilver), Leigh Stephens (Blue Cheer) or Jerry Miller (Moby Grape). I liked their respective bands, just not their playing styles.

Three exceptions: Steve Miller, Carlos Santana, John Fogerty. Real players as far as I was concerned.

Leon Russell at the Fillmore East in 1971 with the Mad Dogs & Englishmen band was perhaps the greatest live show I have ever witnessed. Don Preston was on guitar.

Michael McDonald: The only voice worse than his is Celine Dion’s.

Clapton. I’ve seen him many times since 1967. Sometimes he’s good, sometimes he’s boring and sometimes he’s transcendent.

I saw the Cream reunion at the Royal Albert Hall in 2005. I phoned into an American radio station live from the event with this review: It wasn’t Cream, it was skim milk. Three old guys who dressed like they just came back from the betting window at a Miami dog track.

Flight to the UK for the show? $1,000.

Price of the ticket to the reunion $500.

Hearing Cream songs played through Fender amps and guitars? Worthless.

The last Beacon Theatre show Roy Orbison played in 1988: Astonishing.

Yusuf aka Cat Stevens Beacon Theater 2016: Astonishing.
Elton John: I’ve seen many times since 1972, including a private show in the Waldorf Astoria ballroom in 1990. In 2018 at Madison Square Garden he was incredible.

Earth, Wind & Fire at the Beacon in 2019: the most fun I’ve had at a show in years. Super, super, super tight. Just like James would have done!

The two shows I didn't go to but I wish I did:


http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF_rZrH4yBY

The 1966 NME (New Musical Express) annual awards show 1966 with this lineup: The Beatles, the
Stones, the Who, Roy Orbison, the Yardbirds, Small Faces, Dusty Springfield...

Speechless...

The New York Dolls:

I have been quoted many times about how great they looked but how terribly they played. I saw them a lot in 1972. Each time I hoped for a better show, each time...awful! Finally, on one night at the reopened Fillmore East in late December 1972, they did a show with Teenage Lust and Eric Emerson and The Magic Tramps.

They were very good that night.

I saw them about 10 times after (my friend Peter Jordan had become the bass player behind the stage as Arthur Kane could barely stand up by that point). Not good.

In 2009 the Dolls played a special show at the John Varvatos store (former site of CBGB). They were very good. Why? All the band members, except David Johansen and Syl Sylvain, were replaced by pro musicians.

When Mick Jagger and Martin Scorsese teamed up for the Vinyl TV series in 2016, a large part of the show was the dramatization of the Dolls at the Mercer Arts Center in the fall of 1972. Having been to those shows, I found the depiction of the fans’ enthusiasm as totally fake, but the band sounded really good. There was no way it was the Dolls playing these songs. I was right. All the guitar parts were played by an incredible musician I used to manage, Johnny Gale.

The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame:

No, Twisted Sister are not in it.

Members of Toto have recently said that they are hated by the R&RHOF.

Really?

I think they are Metallica compared to how TS is seen.

One would think that, as a New York kid growing up in the 1960s and buying every 5-star album in Rolling Stone, I would like how the Hall makes its selections. The answer is: no. I knew early on about how the politics and control of the organization by Jann Wenner and Sire Records president Seymour Stein (with an occasional nod to Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun) would affect the choices.

I knew what they considered hip was all about.

It surely wasn’t about a Long Island band, even though we lived an American dream by working our ass off 10 years just to get a record deal, then selling millions of records worldwide, becoming one of the first mega-artists on MTV, and then having one of our songs, “We’re Not Gonna Take It,” become the number one protest song around the world. Our band became 10 times more successful than that, playing stadiums around the world and performing over 9,000 shows from 1973 - 2016. We had the two most used and licensed songs (“I Wanna Rock” and “We’re Not Gonna Take It”) from the 1980s.

But we never were the critics’ darlings.
Neither was KISS, but until they got in I never respected the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame at all. Why? I’m not a big KISS fan but they are rock and roll and are probably more responsible for inspiring rock and roll dreams than any other American band. Rock and roll music is pop music. To intellectualize it is where the problem comes in. And it discounts REO Speedwagon, Kansas, Ted Nugent and lots of other bands that had a huge impact on the popular culture but were never hip.

Us, Mötley Crüe, Judas Priest, Poison, Iron Maiden. The list goes on…

These bands aren’t in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame? It’s BS.

*Header image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons/KissBoy25](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KISS_Boy25_1978.jpg), cropped to fit format.*
Let’s talk lo-fi. Not on the listening end, of course, but as an approach in the recording studio. Singer-songwriter Beck is a pioneer of this strategy that lets the listener hear the real-life sounds of music-making: creaky guitar strings, fingers slapping the keyboard, chuckles shared between colleagues. The idea is that these are not extra-musical sounds but an integral part of the music. For Beck, that embrace of imperfection extends to his scrappy and thoroughly original songwriting.

Beck Hansen was born in Los Angeles in 1970. His father is the Canadian composer and conductor David Campbell and his mother the American artist Bibbe Hansen. Because he was bullied and felt like an outcast, he dropped out in junior high school; the intellectual incisiveness of his lyrics shows that he didn’t need a classroom to get an education. He grew up on church hymns and folk music, only becoming curious about some of the edgier pop music – Sonic Youth, in particular – in his teens. But most important to him were the blues greats like Mississippi John Hurt, whose songs Beck used to sing on city buses on his way to menial jobs.

After a short, penniless stint on New York’s Lower East Side, he became interested in the deconstruction of folk music into bizarre performance art, and that’s how he gained the attention of BMG Records. In 1993 they let him record a single that he thought was inconsequential fun; as it turned out, “Loser” was the key to the kingdom.

But before that culture-shifting song had paved the way to glory and Grammys, Beck cut his first studio album – available only on cassette for the first few years – and released it through the indie label Sonic Enemy. Golden Feelings (1993) drew from the “anti-folk” movement that Beck had been involved with in New York, a punk-flavored satire of how seriously folk music takes itself, shot through with snarky humor and shock value.

The track “Super Golden Black Sunchild” exemplifies this style even in its title. The lo-fi approach is on full display: jangly reverb on guitar, hissing tape tone (the reason for the cassette-only release).
The lyrics are arch yet nonsensical, and the biggest dig of all is the voice, artificially pulsing like a telegraph machine to represent fake intensity.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dm4ca-KRoEY

Beck embraced the meta sneer of anti-folk and amplified it in every way he could think of. Some copies of the album Stereopathetic Soulmanure (1994) ended with the 16-minute track “Bonus Noise,” fragmented sounds that John Cage would have enjoyed. Then again, some copies did not include the track. Reinforcing the parallel attitudes of anti-folk and punk, this record was released by Flipside, the record company started by the California-based punk magazine of the same name.

The fascinating thing about the song “Total Soul Future (Eat It)” is its use of the sonic tropes of old bluesmen, the kind of musicians Beck loved most. He manages to recreate the fuzzy twang of an Alan Lomax field recording and dismember it humorously without making fun of the original genre.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVWTXENGMbo

The success of “Loser” as a single practically guaranteed that the album it was attached to, Mellow Gold (1994, on DGC), would be a blockbuster. Indeed, that album launched Beck into an entirely different stratosphere of fame. It did not, however, alter his artistic vision. He seems to be one artist who will listen only to his own creative voices, not the siren calls of the music industry.

Although it was released after Mellow Gold, the album One Foot in the Grave (1994) had been recorded earlier on K Records. On this album, Beck displays his passion for American roots music with less irony than on his first two releases. The track list includes a version of the Carter Family’s “Lover’s Lane” (which he calls “Girl Dreams”) and opens with “He’s a Mighty Good Leader,” based on a song by blues guitarist Skip James. Beck plays it on a purposely out-of-tune guitar to drive home the performative aspect of this tribute.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHto3hD9cB0

Meanwhile, back at DGC Records, Beck made another album for more mainstream distribution; Odelay (1996) is his best-selling work to date and contained the hit “Where It’s At.” He started piling up dour, downer tracks, but switched directions and producers, finding a more upbeat vibe with the Dust Brothers, a production team known for its work with The Beastie Boys.

Having made six albums in five years, Beck slowed his output, not releasing Mutations until 1998. Taking his time paid off: this exceptional record won the Grammy for best alternative music album. It was produced by Nigel Godrich, who worked with Beck several more times.

“Nobody’s Fault but My Own” explores a timbral world layered with Indian sitar and tamburu, supporting a haunting melody. For a change, there’s no trace here of Beck’s natural snideness.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93Y2R8YmQI8&list=OLAK5uy_nZ5kLujyjeIP-4mu1FvEyrrkhY8GZsuB0&index=2
He worked with the Dust Brothers again for *Midnite Vultures* (1999). This record is a cornucopia of poetic and musical accomplishment, from the satirical R&B horn blasts of “Sexx Laws” to the funky hip-hop of “Hollywood Freak.”

Beck was absorbing the rhythmic and sampling techniques of hip-hop, something he has never lost interest in. The gritty “Milk & Honey” samples Buzz Clifford’s 1969 rock and roll song “I See, I Am.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWetzx01Z48

The title of *Sea Change* (2002) might refer to the change of tone to darkness and desolation. Produced by Nigel Godrich, the album was particularly beloved of critics at the time, who seem to have been grateful for the lack of both irony and hip-hop in this acoustic-based collection. As for Beck, far from abandoning those two fundamentals long-term, he seems to have simply gone into depressed-guy-slumped-over-guitar mode temporarily to work through a tough break-up.

Here’s the rich, beautiful “Round the Bend,” pulling dissonances from the synth like they’re taffy. You can hear the spirit of Nick Drake in this one.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmeg1rwQgo

While Beck continues to experiment with various musical and sonic materials (notably the effective use of Brazilian sounds on 2005’s *Guero*), hip-hop and rap are never far from his creative process. He worked with producer Danger Mouse on *Modern Guilt* (2008) and with Pharrell Williams on his latest album, *Hyperspace* (2019). Williams is also given shared credit for writing many of the tracks.

The title song features Terrell Hines, a gifted young singer and rapper with a wide range of musical experience, from hip-hop to the traditional songs of the Gullah people of South Carolina and Georgia. Beck’s voice is compressed through a vocoder as he sings long, lyrical lines to contrast with Hines’ gentle rap. “Hyperspace” creates a shimmering synthesized atmosphere tinted with soulful harmony.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EG9RWH9euw

*Header image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Aurelien Guichard, cropped to fit format.*
In Issue 125, J.I. covered the mechanical aspects of record cutting with respect to stylus rake angle (SRA) and vertical tracking angle (VTA). The series concludes with a further examination of the mechanics of record cutting and playback.

The reproducing stylus and the phono cartridge it is attached to, together form an instrument which traces the groove on a record, aiming to replicate the mechanical motion of the cutting stylus at the time the record was cut and in turn, generate electrical signals. In an ideal world, after the signals go through the phono stage, they would be identical to the electrical signals generated by the microphones and associated electronics at the time of recording.

There are several factors conspiring against this nirvana, at the groove-stylus interface. The reproducing stylus cannot have a rake angle per se, as it is not a cutting tool. What the stylus rake angle actually refers to, when it comes to the playback side of things, is a form of vertical fore-aft azimuth. In other words, it is a scanning angle. This angle must be in agreement with the rake angle of the cutting tool to enable the playback stylus to follow the original path of the cutting stylus, as accurately as permitted by a multitude of other factors. The accurate extraction of information greatly depends on this.

At the same time, the accurate extraction of information also depends on reading along the same plane of modulation as the information contained within the groove. This is no longer about machining and mechanical engineering (but is still also about cutting a record).

In the case of pretty much all modern phono cartridges, the playback stylus is located at one end of a cantilever, the other end of which is suspended and acts as the pivot point. Therefore the stylus
will always scribe an arc when moving in any direction. This means that the playback stylus will necessarily read at an angle in the vertical plane, depending on the length of the cantilever and its configuration where it meets the generating system. With the phono cartridge body exactly parallel to the record surface, the stylus rake angle, in contrast, only depends on the orientation of the playback stylus itself, which could be 0 degrees or any other value the designer of the cartridge decides upon.

If we were to tilt the entire phono cartridge up or down from being exactly parallel to the record surface, we would be tilting the playback stylus with it, thereby changing the SRA, but we would also be tilting the cantilever and generating system, which would change the vertical tracking angle. Both the VTA and SRA must match the equivalent parameters used by the cutter head to cut the record, in order to yield accurate reproduction. But, the relationship between VTA and SRA is not the same for all phono cartridges, nor is it the same for all cutter heads. This is a very important point. To stand any chance of accurately extracting information, a phono cartridge must have its SRA/VTA relationship designed in to match a particular cutter head!

Phono cartridges must, therefore, be designed by people possessing intimate knowledge of cutter head design and use in the field. This is rarely the case nowadays and even then, any given phono cartridge can only ever achieve accurate reproduction of records cut with the particular cutter head it was designed after! It will of course play all records and it may even sound reasonably pleasant, but it will not be accurate unless the cutter head SRA/VTA relationship is compatible.

This is a main reason why some cartridges will play some records better than others.

This also implies that if a phono cartridge is designed with a random SRA/VTA relationship that does not match any cutter head in actual use, then this cartridge will be practically useless if truly accurate reproduction is the goal. Furthermore, it shows that there is no one-size-fits-all cartridge that can accurately reproduce all records. If a wide variety of records, cut using different cutter heads, is to be reproduced, more than one cartridge will be needed if accuracy is the goal. Then again, there is the philosophical question of, how much accuracy do we really want? This was discussed in “How Hi Would You Like Your Fi?” in Issue 121.

Just as playback SRA is a bit of a misnomer, as previously discussed, the concept of vertical tracking angle during the “recording” (record cutting) process is also something that does not makes sense, since a cutter head does not track, it cuts and modulates. As such, the equivalent of playback VTA on the recording side is the vertical modulation angle, or VMA. The concept is similar to playback VTA, but VMA defines the angle at which information is recorded on the vertical plane, to be subsequently reproduced by a phono cartridge tracking at that same angle in the vertical plane.

In many cutter heads, the cutting stylus is located at one end of a cantilever (called a torque tube), the other end of which is suspended, forming a pivot point and forcing the cutting stylus to move in an arc. Neumann and Westrex cutter heads used this configuration, but with very different parameters. Ortofon cutter heads, on the other hand, used the rocking bridge system, where the cutting stylus would be pushed up and down in a straight line, but the entire head would be tilted to give the desired VMA. For any given cutter head’s vertical modulation angle, the SRA can be any value, depending on the orientation of the cutting stylus, which, along with the VMA, is designed in.

Just as every phono cartridge has a specific SRA/VTA relationship designed in, every cutter head is also designed for a specific SRA/VMA relationship. If we take a cutter head and a phono cartridge with a compatible SRA/VTA relationship, and tilt the cutter head on the lathe to increase both the
SRA and the VMA, then the phono cartridge would also need to be tilted upon playback, to not only maintain the correct SRA/VTA relationship, but also to maintain the correct absolute values of SRA and VTA.

But, while most lathes do offer some means of adjustment of cutter head tilt, most playback tonearms do not. A popular misconception is that the tonearm height adjustment is a “VTA adjustment,” which it is not. Most tonearms are designed to operate parallel to the record surface. The range of height adjustment is usually quite limited and will not drastically tilt the cartridge. What it will do, if adjusted to anything other than parallel to the record surface, is alter the dynamic motional behavior of the tonearm and most probably, compromise its performance. The only realistic means of phono cartridge SRA/VTA adjustment would be a tiltable headshell or cartridge mount, allowing the tonearm to remain horizontal while permitting the cartridge to be tilted as required. These do exist and I have even made some custom ones in the lab to experiment with (to be discussed further in a future piece). But for most off-the-shelf playback systems, the cartridge cannot be tilted, so the designed-in SRA/VTA relationship and absolute values must be as required for the records we are aiming to accurately reproduce.

Finally, it must be borne in mind that manufacturing tolerances will inevitably bring some variation from the published SRA/VTA values (if these exist at all) from sample to sample of the same make and model of phono cartridge. These values will also almost certainly change a bit when replacing the stylus assembly on MM cartridges or when re-tipping.

But how accurate do we need to be?

This largely depends on what degree of reproduction accuracy we are aiming for. There are multiple other factors that can compromise accuracy such as the other geometric aspects of cartridge alignment, tracing errors originating from the playback stylus shape, as well as phono stage issues, so unless we are prepared to deal with all of them, SRA/VTA variations of, say, a second of an arc are going to be largely masked by other effects. The more accurate the rest of your system is, the more it will reveal the effects of such variations. The means (and patience) to determine angular errors of less than a degree is simply not available in commercial phono cartridge manufacturing and are mainly to be found in standards institutes, laboratories, and perhaps the homes of some foamingly rabid audiophiles (the author pleads guilty as charged)...!
I don't live my life by many rules. Basically, I have two. First, treat others as you would like to be treated. Second, don't store super glue next to the eye drops. Follow those two rules and with the help of God and family you should be OK.

If you know me you know I am a loner, as solitary as an oyster, to steal a line from Dickens. I leave people alone so they will return the favor. Christmas is an exception. The kids and spouses descend on the house for the day and we have a great time. This year will be a little different with virus awareness, but we won't be too radical. We usually have friends stopping over all day and Christmas Eve can result in late night Scotch binges. We'll miss the company this year, but we won't have those kinds of parties.

This Christmas, in the year we all anticipate looking back on, we will practice what is kind of natural social distancing. Generally, on family dinner nights the girls will stay upstairs watching some Audrey Hepburn movie and the guys will gravitate to the basement family room to listen to music or watch sports. I know this sounds sexist but it's kind of a natural unintentional phenomenon.

Our former home was 800 square feet, all on one level, so there was no basement “man cave.” What tended to happen was the men would end up in the kitchen and the women owned the living room. My wife couldn’t figure this out until I pointed out the kitchen was where the beer was. The kitchen was tiny, with room for two adults at the breakfast table. Any more than two and one had to sit on the counter, straddle the sink or remain standing. I tended to like standing up. If I leaned against the fridge I not only wound up policing the beer consumption but was in immediate proximity of the desired ale.

At Christmas there is more movie watching both upstairs and downstairs. We all have our favorites, sometimes gender-biased choices such as Die Hard or Bad Santa, and in the case of the sunnier sex, Holiday Inn or Christmas in Connecticut. We have family favorites we like to watch together, and personal favorites perhaps not usually shared. I would like to bring of few of these out for suggestion
and comment.

The first movie we typically watch at the start of the season is Holiday Inn from 1942 with Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire. There is marital controversy surrounding this one. Despite annual protestations from my wife Diana to the contrary, Holiday Inn is not a Christmas movie. It starts and ends with Christmas but goes through all the holidays of the year, including Lincoln’s birthday, with an unfortunate blackface routine that even as a kid I found downright uncomfortable.

![Image of Holiday Inn poster]

The music is all written by Irving Berlin specifically for the movie and includes some old favorites. Holiday Inn was the first movie to feature the song “White Christmas,” which remarkably was not planned to be the hit of the movie. “White Christmas” went on to No. 1 on the charts for eleven weeks in 1942 and is still the number 1-selling single of all time. Dig that.

My second entry is the 1954 film White Christmas. This is an agreed-upon favorite by the whole family and will be watched at least twice during the holiday season. Starring Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, Danny Kaye and Vera-Ellen, I remember watching this as a kid on a black and white set and sitting on my parents’ bed. We had a modest home so in order to fit a full Christmas tree in the living room we had to roll the portable black and white into mom and dad’s bedroom. We watched television from the bed for the full Christmas season and I remember sitting in our PJs watching movies like White Christmas, and shorts like A Charlie Brown Christmas and How the Grinch Stole Christmas, in stirring black and white.
Again, the music for *White Christmas* was written by Irving Berlin. The color is gorgeous. Costumes by the incomparable Edith Head and the marvelous choreography in the movie are a delight to watch. Vera-Ellen’s vocals were dubbed by a friend of Rosemary Clooney named Trudy Stevens, but Vera-Ellen was a wonderfully talented dancer and could emote during dance routines with the best of them. Danny Kaye’s performance is a delightful piece of comic acting and Bing is, well, Bing.

For fans I have a few fun facts.

- Dean Jagger, who played General Waverly, was actually a few months younger than Bing.
- In the scene where the Haynes sisters show Crosby a picture of their brother Benny, who Kaye refers to as “Benny, the dog faced boy,” the snapshot is of a grown Carl Switzer, who played Alfalfa in *Our Gang*.
- The “Sisters” sequence where Bing and Danny play the sisters was not originally intended to be in the movie. During a film break Crosby and Kaye were goofing around with it backstage. Director Michael Curtiz was floored and insisted they put it in the movie. That scene had to be filmed multiple times because the two guys kept cracking each other up.

The movie *A Christmas Story* causes controversy in our house. My wife hates it, some of us are ambivalent and two or three love it. I love it, and because I am the paterfamilias and make all the decisions, we watch it. Wait. I just remembered my wife Diana reads this stuff. Because my lovely wife of 46 years is gracious, she allows me to watch it.

I believe most of the ambivalence if not derision stems from the fact this film is shown on a cable outlet for 24 hours straight starting at 8 pm Eastern time on Christmas Eve, running through 8 pm Christmas Day. I like to keep it on as much as possible because Christmas Eve is such a busy time; I might manage to watch it once, if in disjointed parts. I know the movie so well that I don’t need to sit through the whole thing. I can watch a few scenes and then get back to the gift wrapping I should have completed a week previously.

Released to mixed reviews in 1983, I only became familiar with the film when a friend mentioned it
was her favorite. Subsequently the movie has become one of mine. Set in the 1940s, the scenes in the movie are indicative of a different time in America when 11-year-old boys could go downtown by themselves and stare at the large holiday displays in the department store windows.

My “Santa” days were in the late 1950s and early 1960s and I vividly remember my mom taking us into Hartford to see the displays in G. Fox, Brown Thompson and Sage Allen in Hartford, Connecticut. The trip always included having dinner in the basement of Woolworth’s, which had an automat eatery. For those too young to remember, an automat was the height of American culinary culture, where there were no waiters or people at the counter, just a bank of vending machines. You put your money into a slot and opened a door to a freshly- (?) made chicken pot pie, a plate of spaghetti or a piece of coconut cream pie.

Like Higbee’s in the movie, the automat and the department stores I mentioned are all shuttered, victims of suburban malls and Burger King. This film raises no small amount of nostalgia for me and several scenes awake personal memories, which my kids must suffer through year after year. I actually had a friend who was talked into licking a frozen piece of chain link fencing at Denslow Park in Windsor Locks, CT. It was true to the movie scene, when the inevitable happened all involved quickly dissipated. Except Mike, who had to be rescued by yes, the fire department. “Flick? Flick who?”

The movie was based on the book *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash* written by Jean Shepherd. I tell you that because Shepherd narrates the film with terrific panache and appears as the guy in line at the department store who hollers at Ralphy.

Film adaptations of the Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol* have been done so many times that people forget this was originally a book. The novella, published first in 1843 and illustrated by John Leech, was followed by four more Christmas stories written annually by Mr. Dickens. The story is true Dickens and there is not a person reading this that does not know the tale.

*The Muppet Christmas Carol*, the Muppets version, is special for a few reasons. The movie was released in 1992 and directed by Brian Henson in his first Muppet production after Brian’s dad, the great Jim Henson and father of the Muppets, died too young in 1990. The movie kept the feel of the characters, which was a real relief because these characters were beloved for the TV shows they appeared in and the previous three Muppets movies. The film is a joy to watch and a puppeteering marvel, with the bonus of the ubiquitous Michael Caine playing Scrooge.
Gonzo is perfectly cast as narrator Charles Dickens and is ably assisted by Rizzo the Rat. Kermit plays Bob Cratchit with Miss Piggy as his wife. Most of the Muppets appear including my favorite, Animal as the drummer at the Fozziwig annual Christmas party. A nice touch is the two crotchety old guys, who hold forth in the balcony for the Muppets’ TV shows, playing Jacob and Robert (Bob) Marley, the Marley brothers who haunt Caine’s Scrooge.

One of my memories of this movie is when we took the kids to see this while it was still in the theater, Christmas Eve 1992. The ages of my children at that time ranged from 4 to 11 and they were driving us crazy at the house with the anticipation of a visit from Santa Claus. We packed them into the car and looked forward to 90 minutes of relative peace.

That year I had read Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* and the book was and is great fun. During the beginning where you typically see previews for other films, a simple logo appeared on the screen with the caption, “Coming Soon.”

I stood up and shouted, “THAT is going to be a great movie!” Was I right? Of course right.

Including *It’s A Wonderful Life* in this list will cause some comments I believe. The movie was released in December 1946 to be eligible for the 1946 Academy Awards but unfortunately met with stiff competition that year, like *The Lost Weekend* and *Mildred Pierce*. World War II was a recent memory and audiences were not happy with the dark nature of the movie. Director Frank Capra assembled a wonderful cast, most notably James Stewart, Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore, and Thomas Mitchell as Uncle Billy. You may remember the bird that flew around the bank office. That was Capra’s pet crow.
My family is ambivalent on this one as well. Diana makes a face whenever I mention it and she will not watch it. I watch every year and love the movie. A part of the love comes from watching the movie every year on that bedroom set I mentioned before. But the film has its own merit. Considered one of the greatest films of all time, it made No. 11 on the American Film Institute’s 1998 greatest movies list.

Some honorable mentions:

- *The Bishop’s Wife* and its remake *The Preacher’s Wife*. The latter stars Whitney Houston at the height of her singing power and a song performed with Lionel Ritchie in the setting of his nightclub in the movie brings a tear every time.
- *The Holiday* starring Cameron Diaz, Kate Winslet, Jack Black and Jude Law, with the great Eli Wallach filling in around the corners. This is Diana’s favorite and she will watch it year-round.
- *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*
- *Home Alone*

I can hear the howling already about the movies not mentioned here. That’s OK, I love trouble. Whatever your favorite, watch with a glass of eggnog and some fruitcake. Have a wonderful holiday everyone!

*Header image courtesy of Pixabay/Gerd Altmann. Other images courtesy of Wikipedia under fair use.*
According to an anecdote in an 1802 biography of J.S. Bach, the maestro had a harpsichord student named Johann Gottfried Goldberg who worked for a certain Count Kaiserling, an insomniac. Goldberg's job was to play pleasant music to soothe his sleepless boss in the middle of night. Having run out of tunes, Goldberg asked his teacher to write him some more, and thus the 32-movement Goldberg Variations were created. The count was delighted, Bach was handsomely paid, and today's keyboard players still adore this 1741 work; there were many new recordings of it in 2020 alone.

Part of the work's modern popularity comes from the surprising boost it received in 1955, when 23-year-old Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, handsome and mysterious, released the variations on Columbia Records, attracting the attention of everyone from seasoned music critics to dreamy-eyed teen girls who'd never heard of Bach. Gould’s contribution, besides the sheer gall of choosing this work for his debut album, was a rhythmic precision and clarity of phrasing unheard-of in piano versions of the work, with the exception of Rosalyn Tureck’s recordings. Of course there were harpsichordists (notably Ralph Kirkpatrick and Gustav Leonhardt) who were already focused on Baroque “authenticity” before it was the norm, but pianists tended toward a lusher, stretchier concept of time in Bach, influenced by the Romantic period.

It may seem like ancient history, but Gould’s 1955 recording – far more than his strident 1981 re-conception – looms over the playing of every subsequent pianist. Some have risen to the challenge, while some have tried too hard to leave their own individual mark. In the latter category is celebrated Chinese virtuoso Lang Lang, who released his first-ever recording of the Goldberg just this year on Deutsche Grammophon. While his Chopin and Tchaikovsky are breathtaking and his Mozart stately and charming, Bach seems outside his comfort zone. And the trouble, as Gould pointed out all those decades ago, lies in the rhythm. Mess with Bach’s underlying heartbeat, and the counterpoint falls apart like a house of cards.

You can hear in Lang Lang’s Variation 3 that his undulating, unreliable pulse washes out any chance of forward motion. Bach designed the accented and unaccented beats of his counterpoint like pistons and gears; the design elements just aren’t connecting here, so the wheels stop halfway up
the hill.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qx0qo7Ofx6s&list=PL71tcofI9rKLOQGE1coeRa1FzgUQDxE6w&index=4

It’s useful to compare that Lang Lang slow movement with one by Geoffrey Madge, whose Goldberg recently came out from Zefir Records. Madge does employ a very slight rubato in Variation 13, yet there are long passages of 16\textsuperscript{th} notes played with clocklike precision, so he never founders and is always moving toward a cadential point. My personal preference is for less pedal than Madge uses, but the overall interpretation is thoughtful and convincing.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RlzvSFmDmDM

For the more up-tempo Variation 1, Madge has a determined buoyancy and a clear understanding of the movement’s harmony (which, as is true in every variation, is based on the chordal structure of the opening “Aria”), even if his rhythm is far from metronomic.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTWC3oVsYv8

For a piano recording with rhythmic precision in the Gould tradition, I recommend the new release by South Korean pianist Jimin Oh-Havenith on Musicaphon. Her playing is confident and percussive; she’s not interested in turning these tightly wrought Baroque variations into late 19\textsuperscript{th}-century melodramas. This version of Variation 8, which Bach wrote in cut time (i.e., with a strong feeling of two), sounds like a march:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfLwsKNF720

The similarities to Gould are even more striking in the vivace movements such as Variation 5. While Oh-Havenith’s playing is not as magically quicksilver as Gould’s, her commitment to rhythmic stability is appreciated:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwSKxIeMgbE&list=PLr0MsaDpKsY9x7zKypyzG-y4T9s48NlC4&index=6

There is always a steady trickle of new Goldberg recordings on harpsichord, and 2020 is no exception. Rubicon Classics has released an interesting offering by Marcin Świątkiewicz, a Polish keyboardist in his 30s. One of his particular strengths is being able to tease out the inner voices from Bach’s complex polyphony. This is nicely demonstrated in Variation 3, where the mid-range melody, surrounded by moving fingers of both hands, sings out clearly.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOKhDmOgcRY&list=PLr0MsaDpKsY9Eork8atufmT107FGKQYa v&index=4
Świątkiewicz’s Variation 7 is a virtuosic juggernaut, as sensitive as it is powerful. His ability to express the counterpoint clearly yet musically turns this canon into a meaningful interplay between voices without diminishing the wonder of the puzzle-like structure that Bach created. Recordings like this one remind us just how great a work the *Goldberg* is.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBk2WSfRqlM&list=PLr0MsaDpKsY9Eork8atufmT107FGKQYav&index=7

As is true of most of Bach’s works, everybody wants a chance to play it, no matter what instrument it was originally intended for. Parker Ramsay is an early-music harpist and organist; surely his familiarity with keyboards was crucial as he arranged the *Goldberg Variations* for solo harp. His new recording, released by Kings College, Cambridge, captures a performance in the acoustically marvelous Kings College Chapel, venue for many a fine choir recording.

There’s no denying that the sound is glittering, even angelic, and the playing exquisite. But is this still the *Goldberg Variations*? Only sort of. Consider Ramsay’s version of Variation 11, so heavily pedaled that the notes seem to swim in a richly sweet caramel pulled with a relentless rubato that obscures the natural accents. It’s lovely but unrecognizable.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBPO4zf6YA

Ramsay’s languid approach is far more successful for Variation 25, marked Adagio. He glories in Bach’s aching melody line, while under it the chordal accompaniment shimmers like crystalline pillars.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7Aslz8dMqw

By way of comparison in this sparsely populated field, it’s worth mentioning the 2009 recording (on Deutsche Grammophon) by Catrin Finch of her own arrangement of the *Goldberg* for solo harp. Her version has the more expected Baroque rhythm and precision and far less dependence on the sustain pedal.

With so much polyphony crammed into each *Goldberg* movement, it’s hardly surprising that musicians are tempted to arrange these solo variations for multiple instruments. The ensemble Parnassi Musici, directed by Helene Lerch, recently recorded a new version for chamber orchestra on the label MV Cremona.

This ensemble is skilled in the historically informed performance of Baroque music and uses period instruments. The result is a completely believable work, something Bach might have written himself: He often re-used his own compositions to create new pieces, and this is what he would likely have made if he needed, say, some new orchestral movements for a cantata.

The arrangement is credited to the entire ensemble, so it must have been an invigorating group project to decide how to distribute the counterpoint among the instrumental timbres. For an example of their excellent work, here is Variation 10, a short fugue.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcomYcTDCPc
Clearly, while the *Goldberg Variations* may be a theme and 30 variations, the variations on how to play this work are potentially endless.
Two Big Hits...and a Definite Strikeout!

Written by Tom Gibbs
Smashing Pumpkins was one of my favorite bands of the nineties; *Gish* and *Siamese Dream* are still in regular rotation in my listening room and in my car, and are among some of the very best records to come out of that decade. While I eventually came to view Billy Corgan as something of a control freak, I still feel very fondly for that mid-nineties period of the band that featured guitarist James Iha, Darcy on bass, and drummer Jimmy Chamberlin. While it wasn’t a particularly great time for the band – Corgan was battling depression, and Chamberlin was spiraling into the depths of heroin addiction – their albums were kick-ass testaments to the power of what the band was capable of. Even though the press generally damned their music with very faint praise, or outright condemned it; record producer Steve Albini once wrote a scathing rebuttal to a favorable record review, calling Smashing Pumpkins no better than a less-talented nineties version of REO Speedwagon.

Despite covering the music industry for almost three decades, I paid very little attention to Smashing Pumpkins beyond the mid-nineties. By 2000, all the original members of the band had gone except for Billy Corgan, and all subsequent Pumpkins albums for me became little more than Corgan solo albums masquerading as band albums. And the band went through a variety of configurations during the 2000’s, along with a period of hiatus. During a March, 2016 show at a small club in Los Angeles, James Iha joined the band onstage for several songs, and a now clean Jimmy Chamberlin had also been brought back into the fold months earlier. There were even rumors...
that Darcy might rejoin the group, but it appears that through a combination of her troubled personal existence and Billy Corgan’s lack of enthusiasm for her return, it never happened. Anyway, the band had the three original members on board, along with guitarist Jeff Schroeder, and with the release of 2018’s *Shiny and Oh So Bright*, the Pumpkins found themselves again selling out concert venues just like in the old days.

https://youtu.be/kmLvMm8SRdY

Their new release and eleventh studio album, *Cyr*, finds Smashing Pumpkins moving away from the boundaries of the traditional guitar-based rock that has formed the band’s core sound for most of their existence. And filling a generously-proportioned CD and double LP with twenty tunes that mostly resemble eighties-throwback synth pop, that is, regrettably – mostly forgettable. All songs clock in at around three minutes or so – so there’s none of the lengthy, dreamlike jams, with Corgan and Iha’s guitars sparring with each other, that made albums like *Gish* and *Siamese Dream* such great listens. About the only tune that held my interest for any length at all was “Anno Satana” [check out the cool animated video link], but Corgan’s trademark, whiny vocals – which served as the perfect counterpoint to the overdriven guitars on earlier albums – now just seem, well, whiny, and extremely irritating. YMMV, but unless you’re a hardcore Pumpkins’ fan, I’d probably pass.

Sumerian Records, CD/2 LPs (download/streaming [24/96] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon Music, Google Play Music, Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music, Pandora, Deezer, TuneIn)
1976 found David Bowie releasing his first greatest hits album, *ChangesOneBowie*, which became a huge hit with double-platinum sales, and was instantly embraced by all of Bowie’s fandom. The cover was really cool, and the song selection left very little lacking from a fairly concise overview of the Thin White Duke’s early period. With the exception of one song most American record buyers had never heard, “John, I’m Only Dancing,” which was a single that the record company decided not to release in the US, because of what they perceived as relationship subject matter that was “outside the mainstream.” Regardless, both fans and newbies bought the album in droves, securing its place as a classic in Bowie’s catalog.

How would Bowie manage to duplicate that feat? With 1981’s *ChangesTwoBowie* - with an equally cool cover shot of Bowie having a drag on a cigarette. The compilation covered the four albums released since *ChangesOne*, along with some noteworthy songs from the earlier period that were overlooked - or more likely left on the cutting floor because of the LP’s space limitations back in the day. And *ChangesTwoBowie* included an updated version of “John, I’m Only Dancing (again),” which was a funkened-up, disco-reimaging of the earlier single. Bowie’s relationship with RCA Records had become somewhat strained near the end of his contract, and *ChangesTwoBowie* essentially fulfilled a contractual obligation. It was issued without his involvement, and was his last album for the label. Despite all that, it has become one of his most sought-after LPs by record collectors, and the two
Changes LPs (or CDs) provide a pretty thrilling compendium of Bowie’s early and mid-period best work.

So how does one add to the Changes legacy? The answer began in January 1997, when Bowie was about to hit the stage at Madison Square Garden in a gala celebration of his fiftieth birthday. In attendance would be Lou Reed, Robert Smith, Sonic Youth, and Frank Black, among others – it would be a concert for the ages, and on stage, Bowie was feeling very much the elder statesman of the current rock generation. Two months prior to the date, Bowie convened with a small group of musicians including guitarist Reeves Gabrels, bassist Gail Ann Dorsey (who was part of Bowie’s touring ensemble from 1995 on), and keyboardist Mark Plati, where the ensemble rehearsed all the material planned for the MSG event. Everything was recorded by the BBC, along with extensive interviews with David Bowie, who waxed poetically and philosophically about his long career. The entire package was broadcast on interviewer Mary Anne Hobbs’ BBC One show titled ChangesNowBowie on January 8th, 1997 – a day prior to the MSG event. Quite a few bootlegs of the broadcast saw the light of day, but there was never an official release of the material. Until now! Originally slated to be a special Record Store Day release in April of this year – until, of course, the global pandemic happened – and RSD was postponed until June. And then again, until it finally happened on Black Friday [November 27] when ChangesNowBowie hit the shelves of indie record stores as a limited edition LP release. An international CD version is available, and is quite spendy as CDs go (about $40), but I understand a US version may be in the works. Good luck finding an LP, unless you were in line early on RSD. Fortunately, the nine tracks of music have been made available for streaming, and are available on all the major services including Spotify, Tidal, and Qobuz.

https://youtu.be/cFyAIMZteQ0

The original BBC broadcast was around an hour in length, but for the LP/CD and streaming, the interview portions have been deleted, leaving about 32 minutes of music. Which isn’t a lot, but trust me, there’s nothing like this anywhere in Bowie’s extensive catalog. The songs span his career, and include some of his biggest hits along with some well-chosen deep tracks, like “The Supermen” from The Man Who Sold The World and “Repetition” from the Lodger album. And a notable cover: Bowie’s take on Velvet Underground’s “White Light/White Heat” (which he sang with Lou Reed at the live MSG event), as well as the track “Shopping For Girls” from Tin Machine’s second album.

While there are moments of sheer intensity (check out guitarist Gabrels’ searing solo on “White Light/White Heat”!), what makes this album so desirable is that it’s essentially the Bowie equivalent of an MTV Unplugged session. The recordings are relaxed, but show an artist at his peak – who was extremely comfortable with revisiting his legacy but perhaps still struggling to embrace the changing world of contemporary pop and rock. The Qobuz streaming tracks are superb, and do take a listen, but if you stumble across one of the RSD limited LPs, grab it. Essential listening for Bowie fans, and very highly recommended.

Rhino/Parlophone, CD/Limited Edition LP (download/streaming [16/44.1] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Pandora, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, TuneIn)
Seasick Steve - *Blues In Mono*

Steven Gene Wold, aka Seasick Steve, is an American blues and roots player whose songs typically chronicle the hard life of a common working man – which is essentially a biographical process for him, where he mostly details his life experiences through his songs. He traveled across the USA, working gigs as a circus carney, sometimes as a cowboy, and often as a migrant farm worker. While in today’s terminology, he’d probably be referred to as mostly homeless, Steve refers to himself and to his time on the road in the early sixties as a “hobo” – which wasn’t that uncommon for a free-spirited individual at the time. Although his age is listed as 69, there are some who seem to think that his actual birth year probably really predates that by a number of years. When he first turned to the music profession in the late sixties, he worked for a while in recording studios, and eventually became a musician himself. His commercial breakthrough came in late 2006, while touring through the UK.
Regardless of how old he may actually be, his clear but rough-hewn singing voice and ridiculously good flat-picking on the acoustic guitar present a musician who has lived the life, and is authentically drenched in the blues. I actually clicked on this in Qobuz mostly out of curiosity, but immediately was drawn into his genuine originality, and the intimacy of the performances. *Blues In Mono* is his eleventh studio album, and like so much of the music born in this year of the great pandemic, it was created not only out of a lack of performance opportunities, but also a deeply felt desire to continue to create new music. Regardless of the limited resources available to him in the current live entertainment environment.

*Blues In Mono* is truly presented as it’s billed: it was recorded in mono with a 1940s vintage single-point microphone, live and direct to a vintage reel tape machine. Steve’s experience in the studio environment has obviously benefitted him greatly, and he offered the following about the recording process: “It’s just me and an acoustic guitar, playing old country blues. I always wanted to do it but never felt worthy, but then I realized that I better hurry up and do it ‘cos I ain’t never gonna feel worthy! I tried to make it so that if you was listening you’d think I was sitting with you in your house.” He’s not lying; *Blues In Mono* has an immediacy that grabs your attention from the first few notes! And while it’s definitely a true mono recording, it’s that kind of classically wide mono that was typical of the forties and fifties that sounds so much bigger over your stereo than you’d ever imagine possible.

https://youtu.be/yyNjTR5DgMw

Seasick Steve toured for years playing a six-string GHI hollow-body guitar that only had three strings on it; he seems to constantly riff on variations of the actual story surrounding the guitar that he refers to as his “Three String Trance Wonder.” For *Blues In Mono*, however, I’m pretty sure he’s just playing a more traditional six-string acoustic (seen in most current photos of him), and Steve has culled songs from many of his favorite blues artists, from the likes of Willie Dixon, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Charlie Patton and Mississippi Fred McDowell. As well as introducing four new original songs; the album kicks off with Steve’s “Well, Well, Well,” which strikes me as a very clever reworking of Muddy Waters’ “Trouble No More.” The stripped down performances here feature only
Steve and his acoustic guitar; on a couple of tunes, he plays with a slide, and on “Golden Spun,” he picks a pretty mean banjo. The raw power of the blues has never been more evident for me than on this intensely authoritative album; its bare bones authenticity makes an otherwise great album like Muddy Waters’ *Folk Singer* seem like overproduced bombast.

https://youtu.be/Ey4succjXvg

The sound quality here – while definitely mono – is breathtakingly good, and you get a really startling impression of Seasick Steve and his instrument live in your listening room. There’s currently no information for the availability of any physical media for the release, either on CD or LP, but it’s thankfully available on all the major streaming services. I did all my listening on Qobuz’s 24/44.1 stream – and it was excellent, but I just found out that it’s also available on Tidal as an MQA Tidal Master choice. So if that’s your particular flavor of the streaming experience, it could possibly be a very good thing. I don’t have an MQA-capable DAC on hand other than an AudioQuest DragonFly, but I definitely intend to take another listen with it in place in my system, and soon. Regardless, *Blues In Mono* is very highly recommended!

There’s A Dead Skunk Records, (download/streaming [24/44.1 – MQA via Tidal] from Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon, Google Play Music, Deezer, Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, TuneIn)
When I was a teenager, no one understood how I suffered. No one detected my secret genius. When I saw kids my age on TV or in the movies, they were unattainably glamorous or totally dorks. I never wished that I hadn’t been born, but I was convinced that life was not fair (to me).

So you can imagine my excitement when Bobby Fischer played Boris Spassky for the world chess championship in 1972 and there it all was on public television. Fischer wasn’t a teen like me, but this thing he did – his super power – was the thing that I did, too. Thanks to television, we were no longer nerds or outcasts. We were geniuses, warriors, outlaws. Chess players. Righteous.

It would’ve helped if Fischer had had attractive female fans hanging off him, but it was enough of a miracle to see chess on TV. I wasn’t complaining that PBS couldn’t turn chess into *Easy Rider*.

Now that the Netflix series *The Queen’s Gambit* has become a hit, you may be looking for another ripping chess yarn to watch. Sadly, except for some documentaries and a silent Soviet film called *Chess Fever*, this is close to everything:

- *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993)
- *Knights of the South Bronx* (2005)
• *Pawn Sacrifice* (2012)
• *The Queen of Katwe* (2014)
• *The Queen’s Gambit* (2020)

*The Queen’s Gambit* is set in the 1950s and 1960s. The soundtrack includes pop and jazz milestones of the era, some in the original versions, others in groovy new remixes.

However, there are no songs about chess in *The Queen’s Gambit*. There are no songs about chess in any of these movies. There are more books about chess than there are about baseball, but chess has a long way to go before it catches up with baseball on the jukebox.

There are no chess equivalents for “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” “Be a Believer in Giant Fever,” or a “A Dying Cub Fan’s Last Request.” Bruce Springsteen, John Fogerty, and Bob Dylan never wrote a note about chess, but they all wrote about baseball. We don’t even play “The Star-Spangled Banner” before a match (though we do invite celebrities to throw out the first pawn).

So how much chess music is there? Not much!

1. The musical *Chess*
2. The “Your Move” section of Yes’ “I’ve Seen All Good People”
3. Several songs by the Chilean singer/songwriter Juga, including “Oh Capablanca” and her chess version of U2’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” “Endgames Bloody Endgames.”
4. Art Blakey’s “The Chess Players” is an instrumental. That doesn’t count, but this list is short enough.
5. Chess Records doesn’t count either. What I wouldn’t give to hear Howlin’ Wolf sing about a bishop with the blues!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKwSrhdWR9Q

So chess is not exactly a sport you can hang your muse on. The few movies made about chess reflect this. They work from a limited palette of themes:

• *The Mighty Pawns* and *Knights of the South Bronx* are about inner-city children who succeed by learning to play chess.
• *Searching for Bobby Fischer* is about a child prodigy who wants to be the next Bobby Fischer.
• *Pawn Sacrifice* is based on the life of Fischer. *The Luzhin Defense* is about a bigger nutburger than Fischer.
• *The Queen of Katwe* and *The Queen’s Gambit* are about the challenges facing young women who want to play chess. The former is based on a true story, the latter on a novel.
• *The Queen’s Gambit* is also about a young woman who shares some similarities with Fischer, much like the musical *Chess*, which is about a young man who shares some similarities with Fischer.

Historical note: *Chess Fever*, if you’re wondering, was filmed in Moscow in 1925 during a major international tournament. The city went mad for chess. The director saved a ton of rubles by filming a story about a city that goes mad for chess and what this does to two newlyweds. The director recruited José Raúl Capablanca, who was playing in the tournament, to play himself in the film. Can marriage survive chess? Yes – when your marriage counselor is the chess champion of the world!

This is the only chess film I know of that escapes the vortex of kids, women, and Bobby Fischer.
Chess may not be the most popular topic for a song, but there are multiple crossovers between chess and music.

The Soviet-era grandmaster Mark Taimanov was also a concert pianist. François-André Danican Philidor wrote operas and was the best chess player of the 1700s. Kurt Cobain and Frédéric Chopin made their own chess pieces. Frank Sinatra hired someone to make his chess pieces. *Chess* was written by Tim Rice and half of ABBA. Several male chess players abandoned their bands to play chess, but Bono gave up chess to start a band. The *Wu-Tang Clan* play chess. So does Yoko Ono. David Bowie and John Lennon played, Jay Z and Ludacris play, and Sting built a giant chessboard in his back yard. That may be the best thing about Sting I have ever read.


You can’t rhyme chess with “June,” “moon,” “love,” or “above.” “Less,” “mess,” and “stress” are not promising. But at least you can find chess in the movies, for which I am grateful. That’s my life, right there. To borrow a line that was written for another sport, I don’t care if I never get back.

*Header image courtesy of Pexels/JESHOOTS.com.*
As the calendar days inexorably approach Christmas, the usual playlist combination of the same 20 or so songs, such as Mariah Carey’s, “All I Want For Christmas Is You,” Wham!’s “Last Christmas” and Andy Williams’ “Happy Holidays” inevitably will be heard on many radio stations, and at stores, malls, and restaurants, ad nauseum.
With the desire to maintain a happy balance of holiday spirit with musical aesthetics, the hunt for unusual holiday music gems is a perennial one. The good news is that the actual catalogue of holiday music is surprisingly vast and certainly varied enough to cover almost every genre to suit any music lover’s tastes.

Here are a few songs that are worth a listen that would likely fly under the radar of most programmed playlists.

“Baby Boy” – Jorma Kaukonen

Hot Tuna and Jefferson Airplane co-founder and acoustic fingerpicker extraordinaire Jorma Kaukonen has a significant body of work steeped in traditional blues, folk and old-timey music, in addition to his psychedelic jam-based electric rock. As he approaches 80, he is still going as strong as ever, streaming weekly YouTube live concerts from his Fur Peace Ranch guitar school in Pomeroy, Ohio.

In 1996, Jorma released *Christmas* on Relix Records’ American Heritage subsidiary. A limited release, *Christmas* contained a mix of acoustic and electric renditions of holiday songs like “What Child Is This?” and “Silent Night” along with some originals. It is the only release to date to include a Jorma Kaukonen keyboard performance as well as a song co-written by his wife, Vanessa. One song that stood out to me was his take on the West Indian Anglican Christmas carol, “The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy.” Jorma’s rendition was likely inspired by the arrangement from Bahamian acoustic guitar finger stylist Joseph Spence.

With its simple fingerpicked acoustic guitar and gospel music ensemble vocals, “Baby Boy” also is reminiscent of Jorma’s greatest influence, the Rev. Gary Davis, who would play his acoustic guitar to lead the hymns of his congregation in his Harlem storefront church during the 1960s.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsdtpdX1ef4

“Riu Riu Chiu” – The Monkees

In 1967, The Monkees took a break from their comedy sketches and lip synced mimed song performances for an episode entitled “The Monkees’ Christmas Show.” They performed an actual acapella version of the ancient (circa mid-1500s) Spanish villancico “Riu Riu Chiu.” Villancico is a poetic form indigenous to Spain and Latin America from the 1400s - 1700s that is associated with Christmas carols,

The basic theme of the song is the nativity of Christ and the Immaculate Conception. The villancico’s archaic Spanish language chorus goes:

*Riu, riu, chiu, la guarda ribera, Dios guardó el lobo de nuestra cordera.*

"[With a cry of] Riu, riu, chiu, the kingfisher, God kept the wolf from our Lamb [Mary, spared of original sin at birth]."

The song also references themes of the Incarnation and Christmas:

*Éste que es nacido es el Gran Monarca Cristo Patriarca de carne vestido*

*Hamos redimido con se hacer chiquito Aunque era infinito finito se hiciera.*
"This one that is born is the Great King, Christ the Patriarch clothed in flesh. He redeemed us when He made himself small; though He was Infinite He would make himself finite."

Yo vi mil Garzones que andavan cantando Por aqui volando haciendo mil sones

Diciendo a gascones Gloria sea en el Cielo Y paz en el suelo pues Jesús nasciera.

"I saw a thousand boys (angels) go singing, here making a thousand voices while flying, telling the shepherds of glory in the heavens, and peace to the world since Jesus has been born."

This somber, almost eerie rendition, shot in shadow with candlelight and muted tones, gave a decidedly different image to the otherwise nonstop silliness of the TV series. Impressive further still were the four-part harmonies of Micky Dolenz, Davy Jones, Peter Tork and Mike Nesmith, one of the few instances The Monkees displayed true group singing talent, as opposed to their usual spotlighting of the lead singer with studio musicians and singers in support.

http://youtu.be/c_hlYqCNFZc

“You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch” – Aimee Mann

When it comes to referencing depression, disappointment, suicide and bitterness, there are probably few artists that exemplify the 180-degree polar opposite of the silly lighthearted comedy of The Monkees better than Aimee Mann.

A brilliant songwriter whose lyrics often delve into psychological issues (she has an album titled Mental Illness), her most famous songs (“Save Me,” “Deathly,” “Wise Up”) are probably the ones specifically commissioned by Paul Thomas Anderson for his film Magnolia. The songs added critically-acclaimed gravitas to the highly distraught emotional scenes in the film that deal with despair, death, and other dark topics.

All the more reason why it’s notable that Aimee Mann’s rather melancholy-toned 2006 holiday album, One More Drifter In the Snow, contained a surprisingly quirky and nearly hilarious version of the song “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch” from the children’s book and cartoon, Dr. Seuss’ How The Grinch Stole Christmas. In retrospect, the song’s inclusion actually makes perfect sense, given The Grinch’s original disposition in the story before discovering the meaning of Christmas.

The juxtaposition of this song amongst Mann’s relatively sad stylings on the rest of the album is in keeping with her odd, dry sense of humor. At one of her concerts, she relayed the tale of how she developed a passion for boxing despite her frail frame, culminating in when she decked an incredulous Bob Dylan during one particular workout.

Mann’s soprano voice combines with guest Grant-Lee Phillips’s baritone and narration for a faithful and fun rendition of this often covered holiday classic.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-GxZ7Akl_U

“White Christmas” – Aimee Mann vs. Eric Clapton vs. Iggy Pop

Irving Berlin’s Oscar-winning “White Christmas” is irrevocably connected with Bing Crosby, thanks
to the latter’s performance in the movie *Holiday Inn*, and is calculated to be the biggest-selling record of all time, with an estimated 100 million cumulative units sold, encompassing, singles, album inclusions, and compilations. It has never been out of print since 1949.

Therefore, it can be fascinating to compare how artists in the 21st century might approach the song and attempt to do it justice without resorting to parody or gimmicks, such as a metal, punk, or heavy metal version.

Aimee Mann included a version of “White Christmas” on the aforementioned *One More Drifter in the Snow*. Opting for subtlety, she went with a sparse arrangement of voice and jazz guitar with vibes and percussion accompaniment.

*Aimee Mann*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzfSxxZ9_aY

At the suggestion of his wife Melia, Eric Clapton released *Happy Xmas* in 2018. Containing two Clapton originals and some obscure holiday covers from artists like Sonny James and Lowell Fulson, “Slowhand” also did bluesy versions of popular Christmas songs including “White Christmas.” The Claymation music video for the song could easily be viewed as an analogy to Clapton’s view of his own life – that the gift of the blues and a guitar could only be provided by Providence, or in this case, a bluesman guided by Santa Claus, i.e. the spirit of Christmas.

*Eric Clapton*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmw9vHZCbMo

In a surprisingly restrained performance, replete with a 1950s style chorus and brass arrangement reminiscent of Frank Sinatra, Iggy Pop’s basso profundo on “White Christmas” is a far cry from what a listener might expect from the Godfather of Punk – and ironically the closest of the three musically to the original Crosby version.

*Iggy Pop*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ls1u2-74klU

“Christmas Time Is Coming ‘Round Again” – The Mavericks

When it comes to bands with a retro 1950s and 1960s feel to their original music, The Stray Cats, Los Lobos, and The Mavericks would surely top most critics’ lists. *Hey! Merry Christmas!,* the Mavericks’ 2018 Christmas release, has such a thorough foundation in Americana roots that any of its originals could easily be mistaken for an obscure 50s or 60s cover tune, so smoothly do they complement their covers of Darlene Love’s “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)” and “Happy Holidays.”

With a nod towards nostalgia and a hefty dose of respect towards tradition and family gatherings, lead vocalist Raul Malo and guitarist Eddie Perez told *Entertainment Weekly* how classic Christmas
songs like “Happy Holidays” (also covered on Hey! Merry Christmas!) influenced the writing of the originals.

“Christmas Time Is Coming ‘Round Again” sounds like something that easily could have been culled from a pre-Pet Sounds Beach Boys record. The seamless ease in which The Mavericks can slide between holiday originals and classics is a testament to their songcraft and dedication to the genre, while keeping the rock and roll percolating with their signature Latin salsa and horn arrangement touches.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddoA1By1LVg

“Silent Night” – Boyz II Men

One of the main progenitors of the acapella revival that started during the 1990s, Boyz II Men was Motown’s flagship beacon during that time. However, in 1993, the group had only recently come out with its groundbreaking Cooleyhighharmony and were still subject to the will of Motown’s star-making system. This included the requirement of producing a holiday music record, Christmas Interpretations, which was chock full of original tunes by the members of the group (Wanya Morris, Shawn Stockman, Nathan Morris and Michael McCary) and multi-instrumentalist, singer, producer and future Motown star Brian McKnight.

Each song was produced by whichever member(s) wrote it, often in conjunction with McKnight. The impression is similar to that of the Beatles’ White Album, where the writer/lead singer relegated the rest of the band to a subordinate support role for their song. However, there is one cover song on Christmas Interpretations: a sublime interpretation of “Silent Night” that truly sounds like a group effort. Not surprisingly, it is the only track credited to Boyz II Men.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_Zcfu4AVZ0

“城市聖誕節 (City Christmas)” – Elizabeth Chan

People with the courage, confidence and faith to pursue their dreams in spite of the odds are always inspiring. In the case of New Yorker Elizabeth Chan, the added pressures that can come from a Chinese/Filipino family’s preoccupations with having financial security and respectable professions make her decisions and subsequent success even more laudable.

In 2012, Chan left a coveted executive position at Condé Nast. She had been diagnosed with a stress-related heart arrhythmia and realized the prestigious job that she inwardly loathed was slowly killing her, and she needed a change – fast.

Chan chose to pursue her dream of becoming a songwriter, having abandoned it earlier after an unsuccessful record contract deal at age 15. This time, however, not only did she want to be a songwriter, but she resolved to only write Christmas songs, a move that made her a certifiable lunatic in the eyes of her immigrant parents. After striking out in pitching her songs to artists like Kelly Clarkson, she launched a Kickstarter campaign to release her songs on her own, resulting in her first song, “Fa La La” reaching number 7 on the Billboard Adult Contemporary chart.

Over the course of nine more releases and over a half-dozen more Billboard chart hits entirely devoted to Christmas-themed music, Elizabeth Chan has been hailed as “The Queen of Christmas” by
*The New Yorker, Variety, and USA Today.* “Best Gift Ever” is her most popular song on Spotify.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMB1hhfeD4&feature=youtu.be

However, the one you will probably never hear on the radio in the Western Hemisphere is:

“城市聖誕節” or “City Christmas,” which Chan wrote and performed in Mandarin.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvWh0R8oUA&list=PLawJRPhX3gCNt3pMXimhC_06Wehmaz&index=43

As noted earlier, the amount of Christmas and holiday music is vast, and this is but a tiny sampling. Nevertheless, if any of the songs listed here can put a smile on one’s face after all of the turmoil of 2020, how can that be considered anything other than a good thing? Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

*Header image courtesy of Pexels/cottonbro, cropped to fit format.*
The 2018 Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society annual gala. A reminder of times past, and times to come. Bob Levi (in the black coat, standing, on the left) brought the club from a small local organization to the world's largest audio society.